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**Women in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*:  
Woman as a Narrator, Woman in the Narrative**

Master's Diploma Thesis

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**2007**

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

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## 1. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer is a major influential figure in the history of English literature. His *The Canterbury Tales* are read and reshaped to suit its modern audiences. Chaucer's work is in the curricula of schools in most European countries because it is considered to rank among the highest literary achievements. This thesis deals with the treatment of what is nowadays called "the women's question" in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's poetry provides the reader with vivid depictions of medieval life and it seems necessary to accompany the modern interest in medieval literature with deeper understanding of the period. The thesis aims at revealing some aspects of life of medieval women as portrayed by Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales* with its wide range of narrators, styles, and attitudes is a perfect source for such a study. Chaucer's women are different when depicted within the frames of male or female narratives. Juxtaposition of these two major points of view in their complexity reveals not only Chaucer's deep knowledge of human character, but also the aspirations of medieval women and the cultural and literary background they had to position themselves in. A woman's role in *The Canterbury Tales* is firmly set as either that of a nun, or that of a mother. However, the tales told by female narrators are a display of individual hopes and dreams of women who are not completely satisfied with the tradition that determines their position in society. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* portray the feminine ideals of the Middle Ages, also individuals who fall short of these ideals, and solutions of people who seek happiness. The second chapter provides a brief examination of the reality of medieval England, showing the concept of a pilgrimage and choice of individual pilgrims as representatives of the whole fourteenth century society. The

third chapter treats the women's tales exploring the links between the narrators and their tales and showing how these tales express the attitudes of their narrators. The fourth chapter focuses on the social concepts opposing the attitudes expressed by female narrators; it deals with the tales told by male narrators and thus also with the most widespread medieval preconceptions about women's place in society.

There are only three female narrators in the group of pilgrims. It does not seem much to a modern reader but it was quite enough for the medieval audience. Men had many different roles in society and so they had to be classified by their jobs and social position. The roles of women, however, transcended classes and there were only two of them. Therefore, Chaucer's wife and two nuns are portrayals of every possible women's achievement in the frame of medieval society. When Priscilla Martin describes Chaucer's women, she focuses on the Wife and the Prioress. These two characters form the basis of her theory of "misfits" – women unfit for the role they represent. She leaves aside the Second Nun who seems perfectly suited for her role and satisfied with the occupation of a nun. But whether or not these women are unsuited for their "careers", their tales reverberate with a hope for something more than their conventional fate offered them. These women want more than a short-time solution for their own lives, they search for a higher ideal applicable to women's situation in general. They are not diminished to the purely idealistic or purely immoral world of the male narratives. Chaucer's female narrators are realistic women, they do not lack the dimension of humanity. They are not predictable like the characters of the male tales, they have their own distinctive voices to express hopes inconsistent with the system which they are a part of. However, their voices are not used for aggressive self-assertion and so Chaucer's women are not even close to modern feminism. They are not organized and they do not know how to formulate a distinctly feminine view of the

world outside the male literary tradition. Chaucer's female narrators are the first shy voices of femininity noticing the insufficiency of male tradition.

There is a large variety of male attitudes to women, love, and marriage as Chaucer treats everyday life as his primary issue. Six of the male tales treating love and marriage are dealt with in the thesis to show three major medieval attitudes to women. The stories either set examples of virtuous women in the courtly and religious tradition, or portray women who live in a bourgeois world of extremely low morals. There is almost no anti-feminine satire in the male stories but the traditional criticism of women based on religious texts is already shown in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The attitudes portrayed in the tales of the Knight, the Franklin, the Man of Law, the Clerk, the Miller, and the Shipman are as harmful to women as the satire of the monastic patriarchs. The ideal women of courtly and religious stories are one-dimensional characters whose humanity is limited by their role of virtue incarnate. They are plausible medieval examples – they cannot be matched by a living woman and they support male dominance by their humble and absolute obedience. The religious examples of virtuous women are more difficult for the modern reader to accept. While the courtly ideal shows women in predictable situations, the religious ideal is subjected to extreme and unreal situations. Despite the terrible conditions the religious heroine finds herself in, she retains her humility, obedience, and passive dependence on God's guidance and protection. The ideal women are the very opposite of the equally one-dimensional wives of the *Miller's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale*. These women completely lack any moral dimension, they live in a natural world with no distinction between higher good and evil. Any good or evil deeds of the fabliau characters are motivated purely by chance. The fabliau women – and indeed all the fabliau characters – act like animals, they only seek their own advantage.

## 2. Medieval Society

Nowadays people tend to see the Middle Ages as the “dark ages” but, as Brewer and others put it, the Middle Ages were the best of all times for those who lived in the period. For the medieval society, their age was one of achievements, bettering of life conditions, opportunities for social mobility, and, most of all, Chaucer’s audiences perceived their times as peaceful and stable. Although wars, battles, and tournaments were opportunities for carrying out the code of chivalry, the nation was far along the road toward unity. Apart from skirmishes at the borders of Scotland, the country was a peaceful one, waging wars more abroad than within the frontiers of the realm. The fourteenth century was a time of growing cities and improving sanitation. Despite these facts, the modern reader perceives Chaucer’s age as a squalid one, the mortality rates seem outrageous nowadays, and there is a tendency to underestimate hygienic conditions, low as they were. Brewer feels the need to explicitly remind his readers that medieval townspeople actually washed themselves often, even bathed, although bathing was generally connected with sickness. The achievements of science, medicine or literature were indubitable for the medieval inhabitants of England. English replaced French as the official language of the court, thus paving the way for masterminds of poetry. French had never, in fact, become the major language – even when it was the official language, many courtiers were raised with English as their mother tongue.

The Church was a major influence in medieval England. Chaucer’s England was a Catholic country, therefore both the Bible and the literary tradition created by monks had a deep impact on medieval Englishmen’s values. Women’s position in society was determined by the

unfavourable attitudes of patriarchs. The outward rules and regulations of the Church could be breached, and indeed, as Brewer says, they often were:

If God was very near, and the thought and forms of religion were everywhere, both could be flouted outrageously. It seems that if the upper classes were the most Christian, they were also the worst sinners. But at all levels corruption and abuse, as every reader of Chaucer's Prologue knows, flourished alongside beautiful and necessary ideals (205).

The general line of medieval thought, however, was deeply embedded in the Christian system of beliefs. The satire against women that the Wife of Bath quotes in her *Prologue* comes from the fathers of the Church. Religious figures influenced a much larger portion of life than nowadays, Christianity in Chaucer's England was not a mere religion, it was a way of life.

Literary tradition was primarily religious, attitude to women, family, and other everyday issues were determined by the Church just as well. Woman was perceived through the prism of the Virgin – the ideal of both possible female roles in the Middle Ages. The Mother of Christ was both the ideal of chastity and of motherhood. She was constantly set before both nuns and wives as the example that should always be imitated though never reached. The Holy Family was the model for a real family; the Virgin reached the fullness of her importance only with the Baby Jesus:

Yet what Chaucer and his contemporaries found so affecting was the total group of mother-and-child. It was an age when the ideal of the social or family group was still stronger than that of isolated individual – as it was for several centuries to come (Brewer, 117).

Chaucer's poetry mirrors more than the religious view of life and relationships, there is an equally misty idea of family life in the courtly tradition. The chivalric code wields a set of rules that apply to courting and achievement of the lady's love but the rules end abruptly when the



couple gets married. After marriage, the religious rules for relationships are employed without any transition period. The lady who has the ultimate power of her lover's life becomes a wife who should humbly conform to every wish of her husband:

In love it was the lady who was superior. This made for some awkwardness, for after marriage the position was completely reversed. A wife was completely subordinate to her husband, and had no right to property or to anything else, even to her children. Wife beating was common (Brewer, 75).

Chaucer's portrayals of women and family life are formed by the ideals of his time and by the disparity he could see between the ideal and the reality.

## 2.1 Chaucer in His Age

Chaucer's own life of a minor courtier gave him ample chances to observe relationships in aristocratic families. Chaucer himself married Philippa Roet, Queen Philippa of Hainault's attendant lady. After Queen's death, Philippa Chaucer became an attendant lady of John of Gaunt's wife, thus cementing Chaucer's relationship with his patron. Being a careful poet, Chaucer wrote neither traditional courtly poetry celebrating particular battles of the age, nor did he mention any tangible figures of his age: "Chaucer's satire was personal rather than political, and never aimed at anyone really important" (Brewer, 200). Chaucer's political role at the court was not substantial, which allowed him to devote his time and energy to poetry. Brink suggests that Chaucer was a keen observer, prone to experience both the joys and miseries which he depicts in his poetry. He describes Chaucer as an amiable man and a superior poet who surpasses his contemporaries:

He was of a pleasant and attractive disposition, remarkable by the thoughtful, dreamy expression of his face, by a certain tendency to stoutness, which did not, however develop till later years, and by his susceptibility to love; he was, besides, a pleasant companion, obliging and modest, happy and good tempered, but frequently too taciturn; occasionally, however, he could show a roguishness, and create astonishment by his superior humor. He was a passionate friend of books, and often passed half the night reading in bed. On many occasions, even thus early, he had appeared as a miracle of learning to those about him – he read Latin as easily as French; he spoke a more select English than others; and it was known that he had composed, or, as the expression then was, *made*, many beautiful English verses (33, original italics).

It might seem from the description that Chaucer was an educated man. Brewer, however, comments on Chaucer's lack of formal education. Higher education in the fourteenth century was still the domain of Church and clerks, while Chaucer was a layman who gained most of his knowledge by reading. Self-educated laymen were becoming more common, especially with the rise of English as the official language.

Chaucer's own religious attitudes were influenced by his learning. Although a Catholic, he was attracted by Wycliff's religious opinions; and as a reader and translator of Boethius, Chaucer considered philosophy and religion as connected. He also adopted Boethius' stoic attitude to Fortune which helped him weather the changes in his own fortune. Chaucer's religious experience was a common one in his time – there were alternating periods of fasting and feasts. The festivals of Church mirrored the experience of life switching between successes and pitfalls. And, as Brewer remarks, this double reality of life mirrored in everything medieval – religion, architecture, even poetry, showing both the modest and the pompous in turns:

Frequently the functional structure of churches and poems and clothes was overlaid with swarming lively detail, increasingly realistic and varied, often grotesque and humorous. So it is sometimes with Chaucer's and Langland's poetry, and so it was with clothes. It is difficult for us, in a period of perhaps the most utilitarian style that our history has known, to respond easily to such quantities of fanciful, and as it may seem, irresponsible and irrelevant decoration (107).

Chaucer's fortune may be considered good in the end: he was appreciated during his life, his verses became immortal. As the kings changed, and the court with them, Chaucer was alternately more and less favoured but he ended up as a man of a social standing with a considerable pension. Brink suggests that Chaucer planned a comfortable retirement for himself with ample time for poetry and finishing *The Canterbury Tales* but death cut his plans short too soon.

## 2.2 Chaucer's Pilgrims

The *General Prologue* of *The Canterbury Tales* is the best known part of his poetry. Today's readers are still impressed by the vivacity of Chaucer's depiction of springtime and the motley company of pilgrims who are connected by their goal – the Canterbury shrine of Thomas Beckett. The *Prologue* begins with giving the background of the journey – the poet describes the season and the desire for pilgrimages that is aroused in people's hearts in spring. A journey of thanksgiving follows the time of sickness and epidemics, new life replaces the old and the symbolism of spring as a new beginning is supported by the pilgrims' desire to set on a new journey. Then a long passage follows, which portrays the pilgrims as individuals. The

*Prologue* ends with the Host taking charge of the company and laying out the poet's plan. The Host suggests that each pilgrim should tell four tales in a form of contest, the best tale will be rewarded by a meal.

The long passage with the accounts of individual pilgrims is most interesting for a modern reader. It is not only a traditional medieval account of the characters' appearances. Most of the pilgrims are "shown" to the reader, the descriptions are very visual. However, the pilgrims are characterized not only by their appearances, but also by their activities and personal likings. The elaborate descriptions of individuals alternate with several lists of characters. The Prioress's company, for instance, is not portrayed in detail although a priest and a nun from her company also tell tales. The group of craftsmen shown in the *Prologue* – a haberdasher, a dyer, a carpenter, a weaver, and a carpet-maker – are treated as a group, and although it may be supposed that each of them was meant to tell a tale, none of them does. The *Prologue* lays out a plan that was never finished. As Hulbert maintains, the plan was to portray medieval society in its full complexity:

Moreover the sketches not only give typical traits of temperament, appearance, and manners, but incorporate the essentials of medicine, law, scholarship, religion, the theory of knighthood, and also satire on faults in social life; they summarize the noblest ideals of the time and the basest social practices. The result therefore is a conspectus of medieval English society (23).

Brink notices that the extremes are left out in *The Canterbury Tales*, that Chaucer shows "all the gradations of English society, with the exception of the very highest and the very lowest orders" (142). But Brink gives Chaucer credit for stepping out of the traditional way of depicting society. If Chaucer were no more than a traditional satirist, he would overlook the

“brighter side” (144) of medieval life. But Chaucer shows both the high and the low, the good and the bad, the ideal and the pragmatic. Each of the pilgrims can be easily defined by what is said in the *Prologue*, and they further support their characteristics by their narrative styles and choice of topic. Yet, although the reader may easily classify the characters, their underlying humanity cannot be neglected. With all their flaws, the pilgrims are easy to identify with. They are individuals even though each of them characterizes a social class or group. The pilgrims and their tales are at the same time individuals, and members of a firm social structure. They express different attitudes to similar issues and so they show the complexity of medieval life:

While each [tale] is in itself a finished work of art, they are intended, taken altogether, to complete that universal picture which the poet had in mind, viz.: a picture at once of the real life of medieval society, especially of English society, and a reproduction, in a higher and condensed form, of that ideal world which hovers over this reality as its spiritual reflection. Hence, on the one hand, the variety of the characters introduced, with their different situations and ways of life; and, on the other hand, the universality in selecting these subjects and the forms of expression, the diversity in tendency, character, and style of the separate stories. As far as the compass of the work and the artistic designs of the poet admit, the whole of medieval literature comes to expression in these Tales, in different forms of verse, and also in prose; in tragic, elegiac, didactic, romantic, ironic, satiric, comic, and tragi-comic style; in the specific forms of minstrelsy and the chivalrous romances, the fabliau, the lay, the legend, the legendary epic saga, the animal-epic, with mythology, history, moral allegory, and sermon. Such was the idea the poet had conceived in his own mind, partly unconsciously, and partly as a developed conscious plan (Brink, 148).

Chaucer's plan for *The Canterbury Tales*, though gradually reduced and altered in the process of writing, was a work of a lifetime. Although he did not manage to finish his Tales as he expected, the fragments that readers appreciate nowadays are still an impressively comprehensive outline of medieval life and thought.

### 3. Woman as a Narrator: the Voiced Silence of the Female Pilgrims

*The Canterbury Tales* offers the reader three stories told by women – *Prioress' Tale*, *Second Nun's Tale* and *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Each of these women is at the same time shown as an individual, not completely fulfilling the images connected with the role of a wife or a nun, and as the impersonation of these roles. Although Priscilla Martin argues that the Prioress and the Wife are presented more as individuals:

The two women are as different as they could be – one of many reasons why only two portraits can say so much – but the differences are not between poverty, chastity and obedience in the nun and contended marital love, family life and motherhood in the wife. We do not see the nun in private prayer or the wife caring for husband and children, (31)

they can be for the same reasons perceived as perfect examples of women inhabiting their roles. Chaucer could see very well that none of the real women around him was a perfect impersonation of the ideal wife or nun, thus he portrayed the individual as a representative of the majority. Martin does not solve the problem of the second nun, she only speaks of the Prioress and the Wife when she argues that they are individuals not models of behaviour.

Yet, there are two nuns and only one wife representing the two possible roles of a medieval woman – a nun or a wife. The two nuns stand for two different attitudes of women to this calling. Either they chose the way of life for themselves, are happy to have access to education, and no obligations to a family, or they are romantic, the convent was

chosen for them by parents or they chose the convent with the romantic idea of Christ's love for the Church as His bride, and would be happier as the adored ladies served by knights. The first case is the Second Nun. She is an arduous preacher in the choice of her story and promotes virginity as the ideal even in marriage. Even Martin notices that the Second Nun is not mentioned in the Prologue and her role as an individual is marginal: "the Second Nun is perceived only in terms of the obligation of her profession: prayer, work and study" (150). Of course, this is inconsistent with Martin's theory of "misfits", women who do not fulfill the ideal image of their roles. Both the Prioress and the Wife of Bath are such misfits but the absence of any description of the Second Nun allows Martin not to elaborate her theory to fit all three women.

The Wife of Bath is definitely not a model of motherhood, she has no children at all. But it does not necessarily hinder her in being a model of a wife. She has no duties to her children, all her duties are to her husband, therefore, she is even more of a wife than other women in the fourteenth century who combine the roles of wife and mother. The Wife of Bath is a character representing five wives in one person. She states in her prologue:

I'll tell the truth. Those husbands that I had,

Three of them were good and two were bad.

The three that I call 'good' were rich and old (CT, 281).

Her behaviour towards her husbands varies. She did not love the rich and old ones, and tormented them like the satirical image of a medieval wife. She loved her last two husbands, and there are no descriptions of teasing those husbands, rather they tormented her.



Although the Wife of Bath is the most belligerent of the female narrators, she is still perceived by many feminist critics as a character complying with the patriarchal system. In the end, she is the good submissive wife that she is supposed to be, her husband admits her equality, and she returns back to the universally accepted system of family life. The nuns never question the system, they only opt for the milder alternative to marriage which allows them more personal freedom. Neither of them would even attempt at questioning the system in the way the Wife of Bath does. The women narrators remain eventually silent on the feminist issues. Of course, if feminism is to be viewed as solving the problems connected with being a woman, in the broadest definition of the word, all three of them are feminists. They all had to choose whether to become a nun or get married, and once they made this choice, they had to choose what kind of nun or wife they would be. The question for Chaucer's women is not how to support women's advancement for their general good. Their problem is how to grasp their femininity and use it to their own advantage. Their silence in general questions of femininity is their own profit. The Prioress becomes the romantic ideal of a woman, admired by the male pilgrims for her beauty and manners. She is fully feminine, enjoys the fact that she has admirers, and she is not bound by erotic or marital love. She is not free to give herself to a suitor but she also encounters no disillusionment in marriage when the suitor and servant changes into a master. The Second Nun seems perfectly satisfied with her vocation, she is an outspoken preacher, education is within her grasp in the convent. She is a woman who would nowadays gladly prefer her career to the bonds of family as she did in Chaucer's time. Her time is hers to use as she wants, there are relatively few obligations of the life in convent when compared to the life of a married woman. The

Second Nun can study, even translate religious literature, as English is on the rise as an official language, replacing French and Latin. The Wife of Bath is silent when she reaches her goal and her last husband admits that they are equal partners. But she is also silent before that. She doubts her right to equality even when she questions the system and asks whether six marriages are really too many. The patriarchal system of degrading women is deeply ingrained in her. She cannot claim her rights, she can only question the system and look for loopholes in it. The language itself is against her, literature and education are the domain of religious authorities:

Not only have more books been written by men, but they have been written by men with a vocation for celibacy. Or worse, they have been written by clerics without a vocation for celibacy who are tormented by their own lapses and forbidden desires (Martin, 7).

Alison, the Wife of Bath, is the female voice trying to distinguish itself from the male tradition but she finds no means of expression. In her *Prologue* she speaks about arguments with her old husbands but she shows her lack of female verbal tradition. She harangues her husbands with traditional satire against women. Although she is quite capable of using the old arguments in a new way so that it is not herself but her husbands who feel bad, she still has to use the anti-feminine satire. There is no anti-masculine equivalent, and her silence lies in not trying to invent such an equivalent. She remains silent also by turning to violence in her last marriage. Now it is not the wife but the husband who successfully turns to anti-feminine satire. The situation becomes too hard to bear for the wife. It is said that only those who are out of arguments resort to violence, and this is exactly Alison's case. Finding no verbal means, she uses the accessible

nonverbal means of struggling for equal position with her partner. But it is only her final silence, like the silence of the nuns, which signifies that she is satisfied.

All three women are valuable narrators, giving the reader some insight into the life of a woman in the fourteenth century. Their choice of topics and treatment of men and marital issues in their narratives is very different from the view male narrators offer. The Prioress does not speak about marriage at all but both the Second Nun and the Wife of Bath tell stories closely connected with marriage, and in both stories, the role of a woman is far more important than in the stories of the male pilgrims. Women in these stories are of noble character and wise, and, most important of all, obeyed by their husbands. Only the *Prioress's Tale* focuses on an innocent child and the purity of his faith. The Prioress is silent even when opinions are concerned. Both the Second Nun's and the Wife of Bath's opinions can be clearly traced in their stories. It could even be argued that the Second Nun's idea of marriage and its inaccessibility are the reasons for her becoming a nun.

### 3.1 The Second Nun

The Second Nun is not a widely explored literary character, her story seems uninteresting to many: “It is not one of Chaucer’s most arresting tales” (Stone, 113). The story of Cecilia is a saint’s life preceded by the explanation of the name Cecilia, and prayer to Virgin Mary. The Second Nun does not have a personal prologue like other characters do, she does not speak to the other pilgrims, she only tells her story when asked. Thus, the Second Nun seems an anonymous character with no voice of her own. She only presents a saint’s life, a standard story, not different in any way from what is expected of her as a nun. Still, her voice is distinctly different from the male voices telling stories of women who should serve as examples. *The Clerk’s Tale* about Griselda, nor *The Man of Law’s Tale* describe women so active and so determined as Cecilia is. The Second Nun proves much more individuality in her choice and treatment of the legend than expected. And yet many argue that she only tells a conventional saint legend. Thus her distinctive femininity is not enough to prove that her narrative is different, and she remains silent and conventional for many even in the twentieth century.

The narrative begins with a sermon against idleness which is very appropriate both for the character of a nun, and for the story she tells, as Cecilia is the very opposite of the image of idleness shown in the Nun’s prologue:

We see that sloth can leash us in a sleep,  
 To pass the time in sleeping, eating, drinking,  
 Devouring other people’s work, unthinking (CT, 451)

Even on the festive occasion of her own wedding she is not described as eating or drinking. Instead she is praying ceaselessly. The Second Nun states that she translated the legend herself so that she does not yield to the temptation of idleness. Thus, she takes Cecilia for her own example:

So, to put all such idleness away,  
 The cause of so much ruin and stagnation,  
 I have, as diligently as I may,  
 Followed the legend in my own translation  
 Touching thy sufferings and exaltation,  
 Made of thy garlands, rose and lily-laden,  
 Cecilia, thine, O martyr, Saint and maiden! (*CT*, 452)

The Second Nun shows the reader in her verses what the possibilities of a diligent nun were. Having avoided the troubles of married life, such a woman would devote her life not only to prayer, but also to study. In the times when lay people were beginning to be educated to a certain degree, many of them could read, and Chaucer himself was an example of an educated layman, women did not have access to education, except in convents. It would take more than a century to establish the necessity of education for aristocratic women, yet, in convents, there were avid readers and translators already. The Second Nun is a professional woman, enjoying her profession, and clearly preferring chastity as the ideal of her age.

The Second Nun continues with a prayer to Virgin Mary, the matchless ideal, “maid and mother” (*CT*, 452), which is also expected of a nun. The Second Nun, the nameless

character, takes only those steps that are usual for her vocation. That is the reason why Wetherbee considers her and her tale only in terms of her vocation:

It is only in the tale of Chaucer's most nearly anonymous pilgrim, the Second Nun, who is nowhere described and never engages in dialogue with the other pilgrims, that the possibility of a truly efficacious religious narrative devoted to a woman is entertained (101).

The potential of Chaucer's Second Nun as an individual is widely ignored, although it would be very wrong to consider all the devout nuns of her age to be a copy of this pilgrim. Of course, the Second Nun is an image of a devout Christian, she serves as a representative for all the nuns who are satisfied with their vocation, happy to bethe brides of Christ. But on the individual level, the Second Nun is sharply contrasted with the Prioress. The Prioress has a name of a romantic character, Madam Eglantine, rather than one appropriate for the nun, the Second Nun, on the other hand, has no name at all. The Prioress is very feminine, she pays great attention to table manners, dressing, and courtly behaviour, her French is presented as yet another feature of a courtly lady. The Second Nun is efficient rather than impressive, she does not interact with the pilgrims, she prays. She is not admired but she seems far more intelligent than the Prioress. In fact, while intelligence is a key value for the Second Nun, emotion is more important to the Prioress.

In the interpretation of the name Cecilia that immediately precedes the story, the nun explains how Cecilia, noble woman with a noble name, is to be perceived from the beginning of her story:

Just so was fair Cecilia the White,  
As swift and ceaseless, turning and returning

To works of mercy, and round in her discerning

And perseverance, burning with the flame

Of charity, and so I read her name (*CT*, 455)

The Nun is a diligent translator, she wants to be certain that her listeners understand the story in its fullness so she goes as far as giving several options of what the name Cecilia means (of course, the translation is Chaucer's but here he conveniently puts his words in the mouth of his narrator, the Second Nun). In her explanation, she interprets even the symbols, so that the "lily" which is one interpretation of Cecilia's name is not confused with the courtly tradition of flower symbols. Wetherbee says about Cecilia:

Like other young heroines in Chaucer, she is 'fair,' 'bright,' 'clear' and 'white,'

but the Second Nun carefully defines these qualities as symbols of her wisdom,

chastity and other virtues. Never do they suggest sexual attractiveness (101).

Cecilia's strength is in her virtues. Her chastity helps her overcome the world of authorities.

Cecilia is a chaste maid, she "never ceased in prayer" (*CT*, 455) that God should protect her maidenhead. The reader sees Cecilia praying ceaselessly, fasting every two or three days, she avoids all the pleasures of the flesh. Cecilia is a perfect model for a nun, yet her strength is even greater. Cecilia is not a nun, she is a woman of noble birth, and she is getting married at the beginning of the story. Throughout the wedding, she prays to God to keep her "from all defilement" (*CT*, 455), and when the night comes, instead of going to bed, she tells her husband that she has to remain a virgin, and if he thinks otherwise, her guardian angel will have to kill him. Her husband Valerian, and his own brother in turn are converted and become Christians. Cecilia sends them to Saint Urban to

be baptized, that is the only moment in the story when she is not self-sufficient. Although Wetherbee argues that “her preservation in an inviolate state depends on the resolution of a conflict between competing versions of male authority” (102), Cecilia’s voice is very important in the resolution. Without her decision to remain chaste, her husband would have every right to her body even though she was a devout Christian. Cecilia in fact first “persuades” God with her prayers that she should remain a virgin, and then in turn persuades her husband that he cannot have sex with her. The struggle is not between the husband and the Church, it is between Cecilia and the rest of the world. Convincing God and her husband is yet not enough. When Valerian and his brother are to be beheaded, they convert the Roman officers who came to execute them. What credit of Cecilia is this? She is the one behind the scene, obviously:

Cecilia came when evening drew to night  
 With priests who christened all with one accord,  
 And afterwards when morning had grown light  
 She gravely said, ‘O you that are restored  
 In Christ and are the soldiers of the Lord,  
 Cast off the works of darkness and put on  
 The armour of righteousness, the night is gone (*CT*, 462).

Cecilia knows the progress of her husband and brother-in-law, and when she sees the Romans converted, it is her who brings the priests and gives final words of exhortation. While the reader cannot hear the sermon delivered by the brothers which presumably converted the Roman officers, the words of Cecilia are loud and clear. Although male authority is visible in the characters of priests, in admitting that the brothers converted



their executioners, it is always Cecilia who says the last word. Her power over the men in the tale is admirable, and it is explained that this power lies in her faithfulness to God.

Priscilla Martin speaks about Cecilia's spiritual power that enables her to dominate the men in the story: "Clearly, Cecilia's chastity is one of her greatest strengths. It gives her both political and spiritual advantages. She seems not only equal with all the men in the story but actually more powerful than most" (153).

When Cecilia meets the last male authority on her earthly journey, the king who orders her to bow down to idols, she is not capable of persuading, and yet she gives the reader a sermon based on intelligent arguments. She tells the king that his power can hardly be considered power of life and death, that he is a mere executioner with power to take life, and continues with a classic sermon against idols that are mere objects.

When she is finally executed, she is misexecuted, three strokes are not enough to sever her head. The three strokes together with the three days Cecilia stays alive teaching and preaching after the execution create an impressive background for the death of a martyr, quite as is expected in the nun's audience: "in the Nun's tale, as in many saints' legends, the violent scene of Cecilia's martyrdom – with its iconography of the three wounds – concludes the tale with a powerful image" (Windeatt, 201). At the very close of the story, Cecilia's house where she died becomes her church, "honoured to this day" (CT, 467). The *Second Nun's Tale* probably pleases her audience but as it is considered absolutely appropriate, there are no comments on the story as there are when the Prioress finishes her tale.

*The Second Nun's Tale* is just as ambivalent as her character. The critics do not agree whether Cecilia is yet another martyr submitting to the patriarchal tradition or

whether she is a powerful female figure whose voice and influence in the story is very distinct. The image of the woman asserting her spiritual power is not strong enough for an entire school of critics. Cecilia is a loud voice for some, a silence for others. Obviously, it is still difficult to perceive her voice as distinguished (at least to a certain degree) from the patriarchal tradition. About the Second Nun, most of them agree on the ground of her anonymity but taking a closer look at her story, the reader can see that the female voice in the story is foregrounded, and that it is no coincidence that the story is told by a woman. Some of the stories are only loosely connected with their narrators but this is not the case of the stories with women narrators. Just as the *Prioress' Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* are an expression of their ideals, the *Second Nun's Tale* reveals much about the devout nun herself. The narrator becomes a part of her narrative, just like her story she is interpreted as a meek obedient nun by some, strong spiritual power by others.

### 3.2 The Prioress

The Prioress is an ambiguous character from the very start. In the *General Prologue*, her description is the fourth, following after those of the Knight, his Squire and Yeoman, suggesting that she is another noble character with her own attendants, the Second Nun, and three Priests (eventually the number of priests was altered, and only one tells a tale). The very first lines of her description in the *Prologue* tell the reader that there is something not really appropriate for a nun about her: “There also was a Nun, a Prioress,/ Her way of smiling very simple and coy” (CT, 22). First of all, a Prioress is not a character who should go on a pilgrimage at all, she would be busy within her own convent, and secluded from worldly company. Yet, Chaucer’s Prioress is a pilgrim to Canterbury. After placing her in the social structure, there follows a description of her smile, the description itself in highly ambiguous words. The whole description of the Prioress uses irony as a tool of social criticism. Chaucer is deeply aware that Madam Eglantine is not a paragon of a nun. The outward appearance is certainly not one of the most important qualities of a nun but the Prioress is described only in the terms of her appearance and courtly behaviour. While everything about Cecilia in the *Second Nun’s Tale* is explained as a spiritual matter, in the Prioress even spiritual qualities are shown in the courtly tradition. Although “well she sang a service” (CT, 22), the focus is on her intonation, not on the spiritual aspect of the service. Being “charitably seditious” (CT, 23) is at last a proper quality for a nun, but definitely not when it shows in taking better care of small dogs than of poor children. Pet animals were forbidden in the Church

(Brewer), and thus again the Prioress is shown as the courtly ideal. It is highly probable that the Prioress was an aristocratic daughter whose parents did not have enough money for her dowry. In such a case, the convent was an easy solution. It was not so expensive to leave the daughter secured in a convent as to get her married (Lenderová). But many of the aristocratic women kept their courtly ideals even in a convent, and there was a wide gray area within the rules of the Church because of the cult of the Virgin Mary which was in many aspects similar to the courtly tradition, and used the same symbolism. Therefore, the Prioress is an ambiguous character, yet a perfectly acceptable one for her time: “We are left with an intriguing conception of a good-looking and conventional aristocratic woman expressing herself within the firm but semi-transparent frame ordained for senior female religious” (Stone, 58). The *General Prologue* shows the Prioress as a human being, counterpart to the silent Second Nun. The Prioress has obvious wishes and desires, she enjoys being admired for her beauty and manners, and her ideals show further in her tale.

The *Prioress's Prologue* starts with the words of Psalm VIII in the first stanza but continues in the four following stanzas with a prayer to the Virgin. The Psalm is a suggestion of the mass that will be imitated in the story, the Feast of the Holy Innocents Mass in which Psalm VIII is one of the central texts. The choice of this feast is yet another ambiguity in the image of the Prioress. Her story “is the only *Canterbury Tale* whose central character is a child” (Martin, 34) and the narration of the story reminds of “one of the most appealing feasts of the Church” (Hamilton, 89). Once again the Prioress is shown as “charitably solicitous” but again it is rather a spectacle. She chooses one of the most theatrical opportunities from among the festivals of the Church, a service led

entirely by children. The major focus of the story is the child, the first stanza of her Prologue speaks about children declaring the glory of God, yet there is also another important focus, the cult of Mary. The greater part of the Prioress's Prologue tells the reader about the Prioress' ideal, the mother and virgin in one person. The Virgin Mary serves as the medieval ideal not only for the Church, the Prioress can also draw on the poetic tradition: "The poetic intensity of medieval adoration of the Virgin Mary is caught by Chaucer in the Prioress's opening prayer, which is built not only upon Church texts, but also upon their poetic evocation by Dante in the *Paradiso*" (Stone, 59). In her tale the Prioress concentrates on the images of mother as a mirror of the Virgin Mary because it is the motherhood aspect of this holy duality that the Prioress lacks.

The story is set in Asia and immediately the villains are separated from the hero, even before the hero is introduced. In the first stanza, the Jews living in Asia are set apart as "hateful to Christ and all his company" (*CT*, 188). Then the hero is introduced, a little boy, son of a widow, a child who knows his manners although he does not know why these are important:

And day by day to school he used to run  
 And had the custom (for he had been told  
 To do so) should he happen to behold  
 An image of Christ's mother, to kneel and say  
*Hail Mary* as he went upon his way (*CT*, 188).

The child's innocence is supported by the repetition of the fact that he follows the rules he had been taught simply because they are given by some kind of authority. He does not question the rules, he does not bend them. This is the difference between the Prioress and the child. She follows the rules, possibly without proper understanding, but when she can, she twists them a

little to suit her better. Not so the little *clergeon* (i.e. the chorister boy), he is blindly obedient, innocent, saintly. Saintliness in the legends of both the Prioress and the Second Nun is reached by following the “right” set of rules. Both Cecilia and the little *clergeon* follow blindly the rules they had been taught within the Christian frame of ideals. Both of them defy other authorities, and both are punished by these authorities. Cecilia argues with the king about stone idols, and is mortally wounded instead of beheaded. The *clergeon* provokes the Jews, much like the original inhabitants of the village, by breaking their religious rules, and is also nearly beheaded, his throat is cut.

The difference between Cecilia and the *clergeon* is that her saintliness is chosen, not only accepted without knowing the reason. Cecilia is a saint who works diligently for the Church, and her saintliness brings “profit” in the number of saved souls, while “the saintliness of the little *clergeon* converts nobody, and leads only to his own destruction” (Wetherbee, 99). Cecilia is intelligent, the boy is innocent, he cannot help singing, “he could not choose but pray” (*CT*, 189). His saintliness is not an act of will, it is an act of childish love, the love of a baby for its mother, unconditional and unreasoned. The figures of mother and the Heavenly Mother mix freely in the *clergeon*’s mind, and it is this blind love of child to mother that the Prioress sanctifies in her tale.

The mother is a widow, described as a chaste woman revering the Virgin Mary. Her state is as close as possible to Mary herself. The widow is not bound by sexual duties any longer, she has the experience of both virginity in the past, and motherhood at the time of the tale. In the end she is deprived of her motherhood as well as she had been deprived of her virginity by marriage. The story suggests that the *clergeon* was her only child, just as Jesus was believed to be the only child of Mary. After this initial image that the reader is given, there follows a long

passage devoted only to the boy, his saintly life and martyr death. When the mother reappears, it is with further images reminding of the Virgin Mary, and of the Feast of Holy Innocents Mass. The Prioress does not attempt at expressing any unconventional feminine wishes. Out of the three women narrators, the Prioress is the most conventional one. When the *clergeon* does not return from school, “this wretched widow” (CT, 190) waits for her child and then starts searching for him “as one half out of mind” (CT, 191). Robert Worth Frank Jr. suggests that even this search is a reminder of the Holy Family: “It is a mirror image of the Virgin’s tearful search for the twelve-year-old Jesus when separated from him at the Temple” (154).

When the murder is revealed, the reader already keeps in mind the reminder of Herod’s deed, as the Jews are called “cursed folk of Herod” (CT, 190). Connecting with this, the mother is compared to the Old Testament Rachel: “a Second Rachel, weeping for her child” (CT, 191). All these images are present in the Mass of the Holy Innocents, “the figure of the archetypal Rachel, refusing to be comforted, had a central place in the liturgical dramas dealing with the Slaughter of the Innocents” (Hamilton, 91). The spectacle of the mass is present even in the story. The child should be dead but the Virgin allows him with her special favor to sing until a grain is removed from his tongue. But even this miracle is not accompanied by any act of will on the boy’s part:

And so I sing as I must sing again

For love of her, the blissful and the free,

Till from my tongue you take away the grain (CT, 193).

Again, the song comes involuntarily, and the miracle gains, to a certain degree, the qualities of torture. The action of the abbot – the immediate removal of the grain, makes the reader sense the ambiguity of the miracle. The boy does not die immediately but the reader is left in doubt

whether it does any good. When Cecilia is kept alive by miracle for three days, she uses the time for teaching and preaching, and converting more pagans. The boy does not convert anyone, as already said, and his constant singing in the pit is, although not mentioned, a source of bother for the Jews who pass around. A modern reader could even suspect the Virgin of malice for pestering the Jewish community incessantly. But the medieval reader knew without any doubt that the Jewish community are the villains, and the boy's song points to this fact. But the reader or listener was also aware that such a story is considered dangerous, and it is forbidden by the Church to tell such stories (Brewer). The only exception were old legends that were already established, and that happened long ago. A contemporary story with such a topic would be unacceptable. Thus the *Prioress's Tale* is just on the verge of the acceptable. The *clergeon* lived long ago in a foreign country but her final reminder of Hugh of Lincoln is absolutely "politically incorrect".

*The Prioress's Tale* is possibly not an original handling of the tale, such legends were used for the Feast of the Holy Innocents Mass as a sermon. This would be quite possible because "martyred children, and more particularly those who were said to have been slain by Jews, were associated with the babes of Bethlehem" (Hamilton, 94), and the text about the slaughter of Bethlehem babes was a part of the mass. Such legends were popular, and the polarity good-evil, Christian-Jewish that seems outrageous nowadays, was a part of the medieval tradition. The narrative abounds in pathos, and closes with comparing the innocent *clergeon* to a more contemporary murder of Hugh of Lincoln, another Christian murdered by the Jews (Stone). Although the story would be quite appropriate for a Prioress, even with all the pathos and theatricality, in conjunction with the *Prologue* and the ending of the tale, it is obvious that the Prioress does not present a legend for the sake of spiritual benefit. The Prioress



is an openly ambiguous character, and she tells a tale of an innocent child's love to mother. Her tale is in a way her wish-fulfillment, and she glorifies in the tale what she misses in her own life. The dogs in the *Prologue* are the first part of the picture, the story the other part. The Prioress is more a woman than a spiritual being, and she feels the need for affection of something dependent on her. Despite the fact that there is no "feminist" poignancy in her story, and her narrative is rather conventional, there is an amount of violence in the story, especially in its closing lines, which is quite unexpected in a nun. The Prioress does not voice any ideas about marriage, she also remains silent, or conventional, about the topic of bringing children up but her story is the expression of a deep unfulfilled wish. She is a woman who needs love, and her ideal is the love of a child. She is definitely a "misfit" in the terms of her vocation but she is a perfect image of femininity captured in the world of strict rules.

### 3.3 The Wife of Bath

The *Prologue* and *Tale* of the Wife of Bath are among the most popular parts of *The Canterbury Tales*, and also cause a lot of trouble for critics. There are many various opinions about the character of Alison, ranging from utter individuality of the character to her being only a refined archetype of the old go-between. Many consider the disparity of her *Prologue* and *Tale* so problematic that there is need to explain the duality of her personality, and again many others focus on the common features of the *Prologue* and *Tale*. Probably the only thing about *Wife of Bath's Tale* on which the critics agree is that its narrative voice and choice of topic is distinctly feminine, the world of her tale is inhabited by women with occasional obedient men. Alison is a feminist of her own making. Although many say that in the end she still submits to the rule of the patriarchal world, they do not take into account the time of her creation. When Alison struggles for respect in her own household, there is absolutely no awareness of feminine desire for equality, and it will still need several centuries before the Precieuses movement starts in France, influencing the whole Europe. Alison lives in a patriarchal world with strict views of women, and her domestic revolution seems outrageous in her times. Yet, in her *Prologue*, she argues that there is need for a distinctly feminine voice and tradition. Judging by Alison's *Prologue*, it seems extremely difficult for a woman to accept her position in the male tradition. Martin points out that the voice of the Wife is different even to the point of telling a completely different story, not only giving a different point of view, as shows in the *Prologue*:

The passage contains a vignette and a question. The question ‘Who painted the lion?’, derives from a fable in which a lion comments that the picture of a man winning a fight with a lion would look quite different if it had been painted by a lion (5).

Alison would tell a story by her own means and rhetorics but just like the lion lacks the ability to paint, she lacks any feminine kind of rhetorics.

In her *Prologue*, she therefore uses the traditional patriarchal ideas and expression, and yet she bends them to suit her purpose. When she argues for marriage as an equally important alternative to virginity, she quotes St. Paul, the major male authority who prefers virginity. But it is obvious that the educated account of texts she shows the reader is only knowledge acquired from her husbands, as the reader is later to realize. She is incapable of reading the texts for herself, otherwise she would not use Jerome’s interpretation of the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman beside a well. She would use the source text to impeach Jerome’s interpretation. But the Wife of Bath lacks the knowledge that it was not Jesus but the Samaritan woman herself who said she had no husband. Although the mind of the Wife is captured in medieval paradigms about women, she would gladly argue with Jerome just like she argued with her clerk husband, had she the knowledge of the original biblical text. The Wife also draws a decisive line between the biblical texts which in no way express any obligation concerning the number of marriages, and the Church tradition created by men with no experience of marriage. What St. Paul says is not a rule, it is only advice: “Advice is no commandment in my view./ He left it in our judgement what to do” (CT, 278).

After her biblical lecture where the Wife uses many examples from the Old Testament to show there are no strict rules established about marriage, she moves on to what she promises at the beginning of her *Prologue*, to experience:

If there were no authority on earth  
 Except experience; mine, for what it's worth,  
 And that's enough for me, all goes to show  
 That marriage is a misery and a woe; (CT, 276)

Alison's own experience is, after a short theoretical introduction, the central argument that precedes her tale. The reader has to experience the violent rage of women who are treated as goods. He needs to share Alison's point of view, before he can understand the gist of her tale. Experience is the key to Alison's womanhood. Men have ample literary means to explain themselves, to reveal their motives, women can only be understood through experience: "She vindicates experience against authority and sex against virginity. Both positions imply a defence of the laity against the clergy and so of women against men" (Martin, 210).

This is another feature shared by the *Prologue* and *Tale*, apart from the already mentioned desire for equality in marriage: without the experience of femininity, men cannot understand women's wishes and desires. The only man in the *Tale* who asserts male authority is re-educated by experience. This is one of the reasons why Martin considers this pilgrim "closest to Chaucer" (217), who was himself only an educated layman, and experience was his claim to trustworthiness.

The experience of her "good" and "bad" marriages depends on how skilfully Alison can manipulate her husbands. Kittredge, judging only the surface level of the *Prologue*, says that "[s]he maintains also that wives should rule their husbands" (192). It is obvious that this is a misjudgement because Alison harasses and torments her old and rich husbands so that she is not treated like a pretty piece of goods, and when she struggles with her last husband successfully, she becomes a perfectly obedient wife. Her struggle is not one for domination in the

relationship, as both her *Prologue* and *Tale* show. It is a struggle for love. She wants to be treated like a beloved lady in the courtly tradition, and repay her loving husband with respect and obedience. The essentially better view is that “as a kind of special representative of Chaucer in the matter, she believes in harmony between partners, however it is arrived at” (Stone, 85). Of course, it is difficult to pass judgement on Chaucer’s personal views, as Chaucer was very careful about revealing his opinions, but the choice of the topic, and the portrayal of the shrewish wife as an understandable and rather likeable character might be a certain sign of Chaucer’s own attitude. For all the problems in her first four marriages, Alison does not lose hope yet. In her climactic marriage with Jankin, the only one that ends up as a success, she is looking for love. She already has enough money and a good social standing, she could be very satisfied as a widow, a woman no longer subjected to any man’s whim, and yet she decides to marry again:

Alison needs her own money and the independence it gives. The *General Prologue* suggests that she also needs her own work and the status that goes with success. But she wants love as well and, in her relationship with Jankin, is romantic enough to believe that it will make money irrelevant (Martin, 101).

When Alison finds out she lost not only her money, which by the right of marriage now belongs to her husband, but also her integrity as her young husband tries to change her into an obedient wife with no life of her own, she starts to fight him. But before the physical struggle is described, Chaucer gives us a mental picture of Alison’s state, a picture of a tormented woman who lacks the words to defend herself, while her husband has all the available verbal weapons:

Who could imagine, who could figure out

The torture in my heart? It reached the top

And when I saw that he would never stop  
 Reading this cursed book, all night no doubt,  
 I suddenly grabbed and tore three pages out  
 Where he was reading, at the very place,  
 And fisted such a buffet in his face  
 That backwards down into our fire he fell.  
 Then like a maddened lion, with a yell  
 He started up and smote me on the head,  
 And down I fell upon the floor for dead (*CT*, 297).

When Jankin loses his words, and joins Alison at the level of physical “communication”, he gains understanding of her experience. He lost his dearly beloved book, she lost her dearly beloved ideal of happy marriage. The success of their marriage begins with a loss, and also with realization of something more important. Jankin realizes that he loves his wife more than he loves his book. Alison still claims mastery in her marriage: “And when I’d mastered him, and out of deadlock/ Secured myself the sovereignty in wedlock” (*CT*, 298). But her further actions prove that she realizes she loves her husband more than her sovereignty. Once she is secure not to be inferior, she does not struggle for superiority:

From that day forward there was no debate.  
 So help me God I was as kind to him  
 As any wife from Denmark to the rim  
 Of India, and as true. And he to me (*CT*, 298).

It is mutual love and kindness that Alison desires, and in the end reaches. Her words of sovereignty cannot be taken literally in the light of her actions in her last marriage. Alison is a

picture of a woman looking for expression in a tradition that does not allow women's self-assertion. One can only wonder for what reason so many critics take her words of sovereignty literally, and ignore not only her actions, but also the moral of her *Tale*.

The disparity between the crude voice of Alison's *Prologue*, and the smooth romantic narrative of her *Tale* present a problem for many critics. Martin is one of those who seek similarities, and it is not difficult for her to prove that there are common features in both: "Both deal with the question of sovereignty in marriage, both culminate in a victory for the wife but both conclude with a relationship more mutual, equal and contented than seemed possible" (53). True enough, there are many shared issues of the *Prologue* and *Tale*, yet the voices are drastically different. Benson sees no solution to the problem and hestresses the difficulty of understanding. The tales are mostly closely connected to their narrators, yet the voice of the *Tale* is so different that Benson cannot accept that the *Prologue* and *Tale* should be told by the same character:

Although the Pardoner and Wife of Bath are highly developed in their prologues, the relationship between these pilgrims and their tales is not especially revealing. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is much shorter than the preceding prologue. The story of an old hag who wins back both youth and a vigorous husband can be read as the Wife's wish-fulfilment, if one so desires, but the voice of the teller has changed completely (102).

Benson's major misinterpretation is the assumption that the *Prologue* and *Tale*, "if one so desires", tell exactly the same story. This, of course, cannot be true. The major problem of both, i.e. what women desire, is the same, but to tell exactly the same story with the only difference in narrative voice would be extremely bad taste on Chaucer's part. If Benson perceives the story as "story of an old hag who wins back both youth and a vigorous husband", he entirely misses

the point of the story's setting. When the Wife of Bath tells a story set in "a land brim-full of fairy folk" (CT, 299) she does not intend the old hag to be a regular woman. Although she is not explicitly portrayed as a fairy, there are hints in the story that suggest so. And she has no need to win back her youth, rather her purpose in the story is to teach the young rapist a valuable lesson. The world which she inhabits does not impose on her the need to be young, beautiful or married. The "fairy folk" are essentially free, and although they may marry humans in the legends, they are not bound by marriage in their world. Because the story is set in "essentially a feminine world, dominated by women both human and fairy" (Burrow, 111), it seems quite inappropriate to assess the story as centralized around an old woman who wishes for beauty and an obedient husband. There is no proof anywhere in the text that either of these is the old woman's wish. When she insists on marriage, it is not to fulfil her wish, but to round off the story, and complete the lesson the young man has to learn.

Others, like Curry, try to solve the problem of the narrative voices by suggesting that Alison has a dual personality, "so coarse and shameless in the disclosures of the marital relations with five husbands, and yet so imaginative and delicate in her story-telling" (166). He looks for the reason in her horoscope, in the contradiction between Venus and Mars who both dominated the time of her birth. Venus gave Alison her sensuousness, and also her longing for beauty, her appreciation of fashion; it is the Venus element of her personality that tells her tale. And it is the influence of Mars that she is a violent person, unable to control her passions, and all beauty in her is crooked in some way. Her dresses are gaudy and her looks saucy. And it is Mars who tells her *Prologue*. Also "it is Mars who compels her to gain at all costs the dominating power over her husbands and who makes her a scold, a wrangler and a striker of blows – worthy of being beaten herself – until she attains her purpose" (Curry, 181). Although



this solution seems fair enough for Alison, there is no such explanation for the Pardoner, whose *Prologue* and *Tale* are also very different. Kane proposes a solution for both characters noticing that “many of the pilgrims belonged to estates notoriously vulnerable to satire, more properly to moral criticism” (54). He suggests that such noble stories would be problematic in the mouths of so morally low characters, and therefore Chaucer introduces “realization of the speaker as a dramatic personality”. In their stories, they are no longer individuals, but narrators. The narrative voice has to change, otherwise the story would seem a parody of itself to the medieval reader or listener.

No matter the solution of the problem with narrative voices, Alison’s story is an interesting romance in itself. It is not a standard medieval romance. In fact, none of the romances in *The Canterbury Tales* is a standard one. Although there is no generally valid definition of a romance and the individual stories vary largely even in Chaucer’s time, Burrow gives at least some features that should be common in romances:

most readers of English literature have some notion of what a typical romance is like, a notion derived mainly from the tales of Arthur and the Round Table. The hero of such a romance will be a knight who engages in perilous adventures, riding out and frequently fighting, sometimes to win or defend a lady, sometimes to defeat enemies of the realm, and sometimes for no evident reason at all (109).

Chaucer’s only Arthurian story is set in the time of king Arthur but there the similarities end. The hero is not a hero in the traditional sense of the word. He is not a very likeable character whichever way the reader looks at him. The story begins with a knight (the hero) raping a maiden. He is sentenced to death for his crime, and there ends the male world of romances. From this moment on, the Wife of Bath shows a feminine alternative of the traditional romance.

The knight is not put to death by male principles of justice but gains a year to find out what women want. The principle of mercy which is connected to feminine softness comes into play. The knight does not fight, he seeks. The only peril of his adventure is that if he does not find his answer, he will be executed. But there comes a woman again to save him. While the male world would be finished with this knight even before the story truly began, the world of women gives the young knight ample chances. The female principle wants to change the man, re-educate him rather than eliminate him as a threat. The story closes with the knight finding an answer and reluctantly marrying an old hag who gives him the answer. On the wedding night she gives her husband a sermon on what qualities he should value in a wife, and he magically accepts his wife and internalizes her values. When the man is re-educated, he can have a wife both young and true. The focus is not on the man getting what he wants, as in a traditional romance, but on the change in his ideas about women. The relationship the couple achieves in the end is the result of the knight's better understanding of women's experience.

The knight can understand women only through becoming a part of their world. This problem is solved by the rape which leaves the young man at anyone's mercy. The Arthurian setting of the tale allows Chaucer to bring very strict punishment on the rapist. In his own times rape was more tolerated and, after all, Chaucer himself was accused of rape (Brewer). But in the gallant times of king Arthur, women were protected, and, as the Wife says at the beginning of the tale, women needed protection:

Wherever there was wont to walk an elf  
 To-day there walks the holy friar himself  
 As evening falls or when the daylight springs,  
 saying his mattins and his holy things,

Walking his limit round from town to town.  
 Women can now go safely up and down  
 By every bush or under every tree;  
 There is no other incubus but he,  
 So there is really no one else to hurt you  
 And he will do no more than take your virtue (*CT*, 300).

The fairies were replaced by monks and there is no longer need for women to be afraid or for men to protect women. Alison suggests that the reality is, of course, different, and the monks want to take the women's virtue as much as the incubi did before. But this is only a playful peck at the Friar who interrupted her speech, it is not connected with the central issue of her tale. By pointing out the danger that there has always been for women who walk alone, Alison prepares her stage, and the initial crime is described immediately after:

There was a knight who was a lusty liver.  
 One day as he came riding from the river  
 He saw a maiden walking all forlorn  
 Ahead of him, alone as she was born.  
 And of that maiden, spite of all she said,  
 By very force he took her maidenhead (*CT*, 300).

The knight is a nameless character from the beginning, and the reader never learns his name throughout the story. If he were a hero of a traditional romance, the knight would need a name. Namelessness points out his insignificance as an individual in the story. The knight can be substituted by any other knight. Alison suggests that whichever "lusty" knight is considered, the story does not change. Men are all the same, they need to be transformed to understand women.

Incubi are no different from the friars, lusty knights are like peas in a pod. The only exception in the story, a man slightly different, is the “good King Arthur” (CT, 300) who leaves the knight’s life in his wife’s hands within the span of four lines. Burrow also comments the namelessness of the knight, and the general lack of masculine self-assertion:

The hero of the tale is a man, a ‘lusty bachelor’ of Arthur’s court; but he is not named, like Florent in Gower’s version of the story or Sir Gawain in the other two versions. Nor is he, like Gower’s Florent, a ‘knyght adventurous’. The masculine activities of adventure and feats of arms play no part in his story (111).

Although this seems to be another argument towards the femininity of the story, it would be a crude misinterpretation. Even in Chaucer’s stories told by male narrators, the courtly battles are mostly omitted. Therefore the female world of the story fits the frame of Chaucer’s tales in general - the story is not modified to suit the female world specifically. Still, the woman’s voice is prominent in this tale.

The traditional opinion of women is heard again in the advice the knight gets during his quest. Alison suggests that some of these preconceptions are even very close to the truth. She confirms the tradition to a certain degree that is why feminist critics are reluctant about Alison as a feminist. Yet, out of the three tales told by women, Alison’s is most distinctly feminine. The knight is advised by many people but the text insinuates that the advice is offered by men:

But all the same he never touched a coast,  
Country or town in which there seemed to be  
Any two people willing to agree.  
Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,  
‘Honour,’ said some, some ‘Jollity and pleasure,’

Some 'Gorgeous clothes' and others 'Fun in bed,'

'To be oft widowed and remarried,' said

Others again, and some that what most mattered

Was that we should be cossetted and flattered.

That's very near the truth, it seems to me;

A man can win us best with flattery (*CT*, 301).

These hints are still palatable as offered even by women. But women who define themselves in terms of the traditional prejudice are essentially silent about their real wishes. After this passage, there follows one filled with anti-feminine satire which begins as advice but follows as confirmation of the male words by the female narrator:

Some say the things we most desire are these:

Freedom to do exactly as we please,

With no one to reprove our faults and lies,

Rather to have one call us good and wise.

Truly there's not a woman in ten score

Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,

But she will kick if what he says is true;

You try it out and you will find so too.

However vicious we may be within

We like to be thought wise and void of sin (*CT*, 301-302).

No matter how generally true these words can be, in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, they are only connected with women. In the medieval system women need to be educated by their husbands, women are vicious, and men are always right. On one hand Alison fights this attitude by telling

a tale about the re-education of a man, on the other hand she is still trapped within the medieval tradition, and she cannot but agree with the general opinion of women.

When the knight finds women's world impenetrable, there is no unity of women's opinion, only many traditional preconceptions, he is as confused as a medieval woman is. There is no feminine alternative to the male tradition. Alison resorts to physical violence when she feels threatened by the male tradition. The knight has no such opportunity, as he already asserted his male power by the act of rape. When he is dejected and hopeless, coming to terms with death, he encounters a mysterious company:

He saw a dance upon the leafy floor  
 Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.  
 Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn  
 Some words of wisdom ere he should return;  
 But lo! Before he came to where they were,  
 Dancers and dance all vanished into air!  
 There wasn't a living creature to be seen  
 Save one old woman crouched upon the green.  
 A fouler-looking creature I suppose  
 Could scarcely be imagined (*CT*, 303).

Finding no answer in human countries, the knight decides to enter the fairy-land. Although his attempt is extremely successful and he finds his answer, the story tells us that the world of women, neither human nor fairy, is what it seems to be. Women, considered meek and humble by their nature, desire "the self-same sovereignty/ Over her husband as over her lover" (*CT*, 304).

The knight knows the right answer. But mere knowledge is not enough. Alison asserts her authority through experience. The world of women is the world of experience, not vain words. Therefore, the knight also has to live a woman's marriage in order to understand not only what women want, but also why they want it. Owen shows that the knight's answer to the court meant more than a traditional romance solution when he says that "it is clear from the 'olde wyf's' demand that in practice one woman wants not sovereignty over husband and lover, but merely a husband and his love" (260). It is not a husband AND a lover what women want. Owen points to the fact that in traditional romances love and marriage were disconnected and the heroine could have both a husband and a lover. But the Wife's readers and listeners would be certain that she wants the same love from a husband as she would rightfully get from a lover. It is not multiplicity of relationships that women want but rather a complexity of a relationship with a single man. Brewer speaks about the difference between English and French romances in Chaucer's time:

One of the notable characteristics of the age, at least in literature, and among the upper classes, was the association of love with marriage. In contrast with French literature love affairs are normally expected to lead to marriage (75).

Chaucer's knight could well expect to become a courtly lover, win the favour of a lady, and marry his love. But his lesson is not yet over. First, he needs to understand conventional marriage from the woman's point of view. The climax of the story comes when he becomes what Martin calls "a particular category of Chaucerian heroine, the reluctant bride" (58). The knight has to forfeit all his hopes of future and marry as he promised. His wife is neither noble nor beautiful enough, therefore the match seems outrageous. When the knight reveals the sources of his unrest, the old wife gives him a lecture on nobility, demonstrating on examples of

badly behaved nobles and well behaved churls that “Gentle is he that does a gentle deed” (*CT*, 307). Kane mentions this lecture when speaking about the social mobility in the fourteenth century. As many non-aristocratic families were rich enough to live like the nobility, the Wife’s ideas were very popular, as Kane puts it they were “a subversive way of thinking that was widely current” (109). As for the problem of beauty, the wife offers her husband two possibilities – either she will be foul and true, or beautiful with the chance of having a lover. Only when the husband utterly submits to her will, he has the full experience of femininity. And when he understands women’s wishes, and the reasons behind, he can be returned his masculinity. His wife magically becomes both beautiful and true and he becomes the lord of his household. Hinckley argues that this magical story serves to soften the Wife’s *Prologue*, and to prove that “[w]omen are as gentle as lambs, and a child can lead them, if you only let them have their way” (219).

The *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* indeed end with women “gentle as lambs”. But while the old woman in the *Tale* wields power over the man from the very beginning, having saved him from death, Alison has to fight for her power and reveals her decision never to give up the power over a husband. Both her *Prologue* and *Tale* use anti-feminine literary tradition to its own means. In her *Prologue*, she bothers her husbands with male prejudice against women, accusing them of being unfair to her and in the *Tale* the preoccupations against women effectually prevent the knight from finding the right answer and thus understanding women. But while twisting the tradition to bring out truth about women, the Wife admits that she acts like a shrew and thus degrades her own credibility. The voice of her *Prologue* is aggressive while that of the *Tale* is more gentle. The disparity between those narrative voices attracts readers and makes her story one of the best known of *The Canterbury Tales*. At the same time, though, it is



a matter that needs explanation in the eyes of many critics, and thus the voice of Alison the shrew lures the critics away from the issues of her tale. Thus, paradoxically, Alison's silence, her incapacity to communicate woman's experience, lies in her eloquence.

#### 4. Woman in Male Narratives: the Ideal, the Satire, and Nothing in Between

In the tales told by women narrators, woman's experience of the medieval world was one of the central issues and the stories were centered around women. Even the *Prioress's Tale* whose central character is a child revolves around this child's love to the Virgin Mary and to his mother. In the tales told by men, on the other hand, love and marriage are often not the most important issues even when the story deals with them. Yet the way of speaking about women is very different and the reader can gain precious insight into what influenced medieval women and how they were treated. Women are either idealized or satirized in the tales. The reader cannot find such a plastic feminine character as in the women's tales; the realistic view is often lacking. Women are either portrayed as the courtly or the Christian ideal, or as low beings within the generally low world of the fabliaux. Out of the many tales in which women take active part in the plot or subplot, six demonstrate these three different attitudes best – the *Knight's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale* show woman as the courtly ideal, the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Man of Law's Tale* present the religious ideal of a woman, and the *Miller's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* are fabliaux about immoral women in a world without moral judgement. In the romances, the central issues are the man's love and courtship and how to deal with ideal marriage in reality. In the *Knight's Tale*, no one cares what the object of love thinks or which of the suitors she prefers, the tale is a mere spectacle of the glorious courtly life. The *Franklin's Tale* starts with an "ideal" marriage: the husband promises obedience to his wife while she promises obedience to him. But when a crisis occurs, neither of them knows how to fulfil the original idea of equality. In both the religious tales, women are central not as individual beings

but as a symbol of Christian virtues. Just like the situations of the stories, or rather exempla, both women are quite unreal. Griselda in her utter obedience to her husband may even seem a monster to a twentieth-century reader. The fabliaux are comedies about marital unfaithfulness but there is no satirical undertone as the women are not judged for their behaviour. It is perceived as natural that a young wife to an old husband has to find another companion. In other words, women are driven by laws of nature.

#### 4.1 The *Knight's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*: the Courtly Ideal

The ideal of a woman in the courtly poetic tradition was a radiant, noble beauty who inspired her knight to chivalric deeds. She was a gentle, kind woman, with a disposition to pity the poor lover if she was not in love with him from the beginning. She did not necessarily have to be single, and the relationship with her lover did not need to be physical. The courtly lover had no claim to his mistress' favour. He was her servant and should consider her smile to be his ample reward (Coghill, 12). Of course, the lovers in romances are rewarded more and more during the course of their service and the relationship of a lover and his lady becomes a sexual relationship at a certain point of the story. Extramarital relationship is not condemned in romances because the lovers act in the name of love whereas the marriage has other purposes. Although the love of a lady is the motivation for the knight to be brave in battle and improve his character, the central character is the knight, his quest or exploits.

None of Chaucers' romances, as already said, concentrates on the battles, exploits, and courtly festivals. The Wife of Bath's romance even goes as far as marginalizing the male role and substituting a female world for the knightly one. Other romances are not so radical, and the *Knight's Tale* is, with its sumptuous depictions of the life of aristocracy, close to a true

romance. Two men fight for the love of a woman, and she is eventually won. The king who captures the heroes at the beginning of the tale is eventually moved to pity and forgiveness by the power of their love for Emily. Moreover, the marriage serves political reasons and Emily is practically given away to ensure lasting peace between Athens and Thebes. The *Franklin's Tale* begins where a romance would end – with a couple that got married after the knight's long service to his lady. Their marriage seems to be the courtly ideal, the knight promises eternal service to his lady and expresses his wish never to be her master, and the lady vows eternal obedience to her lord as a proper wife. The Franklin questions the ideal by putting the marriage in crisis when a young suitor appears. The behaviour of all three can be easily criticised even though they all try to act by the rules of courtly behaviour.

#### 4.1.1 The *Knight's Tale*

The *Knight's Tale* is a tale of struggle for the favour of Emily, sister of the queen, between two cousins, Arcita and Palamon. Their love is so deep that it separates their brotherly relationship, and while they are in prison, Emily has no idea at all that they are in love with her. She is single, the sister of king Theseus's wife, and extremely passive throughout the tale: "A female character is viewed exclusively from the outside for a long time. Her thoughts, when we learn them, are very different from the thoughts projected on to her" (Martin, 48). Until the night before the final battle for her hand, Emily remains silent, and is depicted as "Young Emily, that fairer was of mien/ Than lily is on its stalk of green" (CT, 47). She sings like an angel, is "the radiant and serene" (CT, 49). Palamon compares her to Venus and Arcita immediately argues that he loves her better because he loves Emily as a woman, not as a goddess. But, in fact, neither of them loves the woman, both love the icon. Emily is a symbol of

both freedom, and courtly love. The garden where they see her is in itself an emblem of love and its fulfilment and, as Kolve says, Emily is in fact loved for her freedom and not much else:

The two young knights fall in love with Emelye for her beauty, unmistakably, but for the beauty of her freedom most of all. They cannot describe her – for they cannot see her – apart from the liberty and ease of her movement. From within prison they fall in love with a creature who seems to incarnate a condition the exact opposite of their own. Indeed, we are made to see this gratuitous decision to love – this act of pure will – as their only available expression of something within them still free, not limited by prison walls, leg-irons, or exile (90).

None of the lovers speaks to her and neither is there any suggestion of her thoughts until the moment of her prayer to Diana when she reveals that she does not wish to marry. Emily is only depicted as a symbolic value of a woman in the courtly society, she has no individual will and when she does have a wish, it is quickly suppressed. Emily's courtly value lies in her passivity.

Emily's only expression of individuality, her wish not to get married, is quite understandable. After all, Emily is a young Amazon. But she is as helpless in the male world as her heavenly patron is. Diana stands aside while Venus and Mars compete like a mirror-image of Palamon and Arcita. Both Venus and Mars give the lovers signs that their prayers were accepted while Diana appears to Emily and tells her it is not possible to grant her wish, suggesting that higher authorities decide the fates of women:

For thee the Gods on high have set their term,  
And by eternal word and writ confirm  
That thou shalt be espoused to one of those  
That have for thee endured so many woes (*CT*, 82).

There are higher gods than Diana and their decision cannot be altered. There are also higher authorities in Athens than a woman, no matter how noble born she may be, and the decision about Emily's fate lies in the hands of Theseus eventually. Theseus does not even ask whether Emily wants to marry, her opinion is not important. Emily has two roles in the society of Theseus: the courtly and the political one. She is the beloved ideal, and at the same time a kind of "goods" to secure political stability if placed properly in marriage. Muscatine speaks about the love life of the romance heroine suggesting that "[t]he lady in the *Knight's Tale* is merely a symbol of the noble man's desires. [...] We take love in this society for granted" (74). Emily as a courtly heroine is merely a symbol of the knight's love and faithfulness. She is a stock character who not only lacks depth of her own, but is also deprived of the courtly allusions directly connected with her character in Boccaccio. Emily's other role, that of a political figure, is highlighted by Theseus's speech about the "First Mover", in which his goal is, as the reader can see, primarily that of ensuring political stability. The veil of higher ideals and general good is only a thin one, and even in the twentieth-century the reader recognizes a politician's speech under the surface. Wetherbee also comments on the political appropriateness of the marriage:

Resolving to bring about a marriage between Palamon and Emily, he justifies his decision with a long discourse on the order of things, but the marriage is clearly a political event, designed to preserve the subordination of Thebes to Athens (45).

As already mentioned by Martin, the final wedding was preceded by a funeral. While the funeral is given more than a hundred lines of space in the tale, the marriage is dealt with in the course of four lines. It may be surprising to today's reader that during the funeral Emily is shown as "the most sorrowful of the company" (CT, 96), yet, shortly afterwards she is married off "with every bliss and melody" (CT, 102). Such flexibility of emotion seems suspicious

nowadays, and the reader expects constancy of feeling from a courtly heroine. But Brewer comments on the frequent twists in medieval literature; he finds it very common that joy is immediately followed by sadness and vice versa: “What is perhaps odd to us is the way people could shrug off deep and genuine feeling and quickly turn to joy and joking. If they felt more passionately than we do, they also felt less persistently” (71). Emily is not inconsistent in her promise like Criseyde is. She never gave her love to either of the men before Theseus’ speech; her only wish that was granted is that the winner should deserve her:

Yet if thou wilt not do me so much grace  
 Or if my destiny ordains it so  
 That one shall have me whether I will or no,  
 Then send me him that shall desire me most (*CT*, 81).

After the funeral she is free to love the one who fought not for victory but for his lady. Yet the “happy ending” of all wishes granted, of a happy marriage and of political stability is overshadowed by the tragedy of death, cruelty of imagery in the temples and gods playing games with humans.

The tale is essentially not about women, not even about the one who is the central character, the “mover” without whom the narrative could not go on. It is a philosophical tale, a tragic and a political one, serving to demonstrate the grandeur of the aristocratic life. But among all these, it expresses a common courtly opinion: the woman does not stand for herself, she is a symbol of the knight’s wishes, of virtues, even of love. She is expected to be beautiful, chaste, humble and silent. When she has an individual opinion, it is subjected to change according to the current situation. The courtly ideal is in fact always subjected to male hierarchies and her decision is never entirely hers. In the *Knight’s Tale*, Emily is not even won by courtship and the

knight's service which would be common in a romance. Arcita serves her in disguise and Emily never knows she could choose a lover until the moment it is decided by Theseus that she should marry the winner of a tournament. Although Emily is not a typical courtly heroine, she is not won step by step like Criseyde. She cannot decide which knight to love or whether to give her love at all. Yet, she meets the requirements for a courtly heroine in many other ways. She is the inspiration for two knights who love her, argue for her and their service to her while they are in prison lies in breaking their ties with each other. Eventually the fight for her in a tournament and her pity is won first, then also her love. Chaucer's Emily does not stand for herself nor for any individual woman, which makes her a perfect courtly ideal.

#### 4.1.2 The *Franklin's Tale*

The heroine of the *Franklin's Tale* is granted a much greater degree of individuality than Emily but the tale begins in a completely different stage of relationship. Where Emily ends, Dorigen begins. She has already been won after a long courtship. On the one hand she is a wife subjected to her husband, on the other hand she has enough freedom to make her own decisions not only because her husband promised her not to be her master, but also on behalf of his long absences. Arveragus is a true knight comparable to Theseus of the *Knight's Tale*. He does not remain a servant of his love: he fights in battles, has duty to his king, and often has to leave his beloved for a long period of time. But of course, as in his other knightly narratives, Chaucer does not deal with his knightly exploits but rather he concentrates on a completely different issue. The *Franklin's Tale* explores marital problems neither as a fabliau issue nor as a Christian exemplum. The narrator claims that his story is a Breton lay, which is a pre-Christian



story not bound by fourteenth-century morality. And it is the imperfection of the pre-Christian idea of truth and faithfulness that creates the conflict.

Arveragus and Dorigen are a perfect courtly couple. Dorigen is beautiful, noble and does not lack the capacity to pity the knight who suffers for her. Just like Emily, Dorigen is propelled to love by pity. Arveragus does not insist on his own mastery and offers his lady sovereignty in marriage immediately. Dorigen never has to struggle for recognition of equality like the Wife of Bath and the Franklin makes it quite clear that none of the couple should dominate the marriage once and for all:

For there's one thing, my lords, it's safe to say;

Lovers must each be ready to obey

The other, if they would long keep company.

Love will not be constrained by mastery,

When mastery comes the god of love anon

Stretches his wings and farewell! He is gone.

Love is a thing as any spirit free;

Women by nature long for liberty

And not to be constrained or made a thrall,

And so do men, if I may speak for all (CT, 428).

Kittredge argues that the marriage is “a brilliant success” (215) and that the Franklin consoles the Wife of Bath and the Clerk by telling a tale where the married couple live in settled equality from the beginning. There is no proof that the tales concerning marriage should be connected, especially not those of the Wife and the Clerk. But the *Franklin's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* certainly have some features in common. Both deal with marriage and, to a certain degree,

with sovereignty in marriage. The Wife focuses on achieving equality, the Franklin on what comes after and how these ideals are to be maintained during a lasting marriage. The Wife states that her authority to speak on marital matters comes from her experience and it does not seem far fetched to assume that the Franklin also challenges the courtly ideals on account of his own life – he is an old man, and important member of the landed gentry in his county. As such, he has his own experience of marriage and has already seen many other marriages closely, especially in the office of justice and sheriff.

The concept of love in the *Franklin's Tale* is relatively modern, and he acknowledges the wish of such women as the Wife of Bath to feel equal with their husbands. Therefore his Dorigen is more realistic as a character, not limited merely to the role of the ideal. She makes her own decisions and also her own mistakes. Emily, in contrast, is never allowed more than a wish. She cannot decide for herself, therefore she cannot cause much pain. Dorigen can hurt her husband and knight deeply, and indeed, she does. Her rash promise to love Aurelius is enough to make Arveragus cry when he finds out. But then Arveragus, in his turn, hurts Dorigen as well when he forces her to keep her promise although she would rather commit suicide. All the characters of the tale are human and could be criticised for their behaviour. However, at the beginning of the story the couple acts as stereotypical characters of a romance, their marriage and the private arrangement, or as Stone describes it “the frame of multiple promises within which the couple exist” (110), is described in great detail on more than a hundred lines before the reader learns their names. There are two levels of the story, or rather two stages. The first one deals with the courtly ideal, the lady is won, decides to marry her knight, and there is no suggestion of political or economic reasons behind the marriage. The lady is quite free to make decisions, which is not an ordinary medieval situation, especially not for an aristocratic woman

whose marriage is often arranged to increase power, wealth or political influence of the family. But it is the ideal situation, in fact, the only one that can provide for a courtly love affair to end in marriage. This first stage portraying an ideal marriage based upon love and equality is important to set the scene. The second stage questions the ideal merely by showing that every ideal has to be enacted by human beings, and human beings are necessarily flawed.

Arveragus has to leave for a long time and Dorigen feels dejected. When her friends try to console her, a young knight Aurelius approaches her and declares his love. In the code of courtly romances, Aurelius could well have a chance to become the lady's true love although she already has a husband. That is what happens in the *Merchant's Tale* where January's wife May accepts a young lover and cannot really be judged for it because her husband is old and she does not love him. But in the *Franklin's Tale* the situation is different because of the web of promises which connects the couple. Dorigen refuses the suitor, deciding to stay faithful to her husband. But when Aurelius insists, Dorigen, in her sadness and fear for her husband, makes a rash promise to love Aurelius if he removes all the stones from the Breton coast. Dorigen's only wish is the safety of her husband and Aurelius can be, and often is, criticised for knowing her weakness and abusing it. He does not remove the stones but finds a magician to create the illusion of completely clear coast, thus binding Dorigen to fulfil her promise to him. Dorigen hopelessly ponders suicide and when her husband returns, she tells him about her promise. Dorigen's confession and Arveragus's reaction to it are the climax of the story. Arveragus forces his wife to keep her promise to the young suitor. His action can be perceived as both positive and negative. Despite the negative aspects of the situation, Kittredge claims that the solution is the best one possible: "We need not hesitate, therefore, to accept the solution which

the Franklin offers as that which Geoffrey Chaucer the man accepted for his own part. Certainly it is a solution that does him infinite credit. A better has never been devised or imagined” (215).

Kittredge is a modern critic, he is not a Chaucerian character, therefore his claim that Arveragus’s solution is the best one ever seems rather dubious to the reader. Other critics are not so straightforward in their judgement and acknowledge that the marriage remained a happy one on the account of Aurelius’ decision to waive his claim to Dorigen rather than on account of Arveragus’s decision that one should keep one’s word. Wetherbee argues that the woman is in a difficult position because the code of her behaviour is suddenly changed; Dorigen has to behave by the male chivalric code, her marriage transfers her in a category where honour and shame are measured by keeping one’s promises:

The *Franklin’s Tale* addresses the relations of the courtly and chivalric worlds directly, testing the capacity of courtly values to mediate the relations of men governed by the code of chivalry with women who are the exalted objects of courtly reverence, but whose status is determined by male prerogatives and male honor (40).

When Dorigen comes for help and support, Arveragus acts and decides according to the male rules of chivalry. Stone suggests that the marriage is based on the same chivalric promises and therefore Arveragus cannot decide for anything else (110). Yet, it remains clear to most that in this climactic moment, Arveragus grasps his power of a husband – which he promised to relinquish – and orders his wife what to do. To the modern reader it seems that perfect equality of partners is shown as impossible, especially in times of crisis. But the final question of the story turns from the woman and asks which of the three men “seemed the finest gentleman” (CT, 451) – the husband who allowed his wife to keep her promise, the knight who let her go

without fulfilling her promise to him, or the magician who did not exact his fee from the young Aurelius.

All three participate in either deceiving the woman or carrying the deception to its end. The husband does not allow, he forces. Dorigen would rather kill herself than keep her promise, yet her husband tells her to go, and she, in order to be his “true and humble wife” (CT, 428) has to meet Aurelius and give him what he wants. Aurelius gains Dorigen’s promise when she is desperate, and does not win her favour by deeds of chivalry as a knight ought to but instead tricks her into false belief. On the ground of this belief he demands her body. Aurelius is not a true ideal knight as Arveragus of the first stage is. And the magician is well aware of the situation, yet he agrees to deceive the lady for an astronomic fee. None of these three men could be considered a fine gentleman by twentieth-century standards. But the fourteenth-century reader or listener had a completely different attitude. As Specht explains, we live in a world with different religiousness and a different attitude to truth:

The central moral issue which Arveragus has to face at the climax of the Tale, namely, the question whether or not to trust in the hand of Providence against all odds – or in the power of ‘trouthe’ to deliver one in the hour of need – may appeal less to the modern mind than it is likely to have done to a medieval audience. The diversity of modern critical opinion on Chaucer’s intentions in the *Franklin’s Tale* would seem to some extent to reflect this fundamental difference of outlook and religious temperament (169-170).

Nowadays, truth is relative, plurality of religion within one country is the standard, and almost every individual has his own truth. In the twentieth century the individual is the measure of everything. Not so in the Middle Ages. In Chaucer’s England, truth was not just a relative word, it was a spiritual power. Arveragus’s decision that his wife has to keep her promise does not

seem so outrageous once the reader knows Arveragus could hope for the power of truth to save his marriage. Still, the decision is debatable and Wetherbee presents a different view of Arveragus. He does not judge the wife for her rash promise as harshly as he judges the husband for his equally rash decision that she should keep her promise:

‘Trouthe [i.e. A promise, one’s word] is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe,’ has been variously explained: as expressing Arveragus’ pain at the decision he must make; as a shrewd manipulation of Dorigen; as a sign of perplexity or moral confusion. But it remains opaque, psychologically and morally, and perhaps its main purpose is to make us question the Franklin’s earlier emphasis on the trust central to this marriage. In this first testing of the relationship Arveragus all too readily assumes the role of the domestic tyrant, and any nobility we may discern in his insistence on the importance of keeping troth is compromised by our awareness that he is treating his own marriage as Aurelius’ fantastically contrived idyll with equal seriousness (Wetherbee, 54-55).

Arveragus decides about Dorigen’s fate even faster than Dorigen gives her promise. He decides by a chivalric code he is a part of. His decision shifts the focus of the tale back into the male world and Dorigen is no longer in the centre of the narrative. She only acts out her husband’s will, and the rest of the tale celebrates the noble behaviour of the men.

Dorigen of the tale’s beginning is the very opposite of the broken wife submitting entirely to her husband at the end of the tale. The ideal lady is also a human being, her life is not the happy-ever-after of romances. She makes independent decisions only until her decision is wrong, then she becomes the “true and humble wife” (*CT*, 428) as she promised. Arveragus is an ideal knight who promises his wife to keep only nominal sovereignty for himself so that he would not be shamed in public but in the first crisis his resolution crumbles. The spiritual power

of truth may well have saved the marriage but the final image is not that of an equal relationship strengthened by a crisis. It is that of a traditional marriage where the husband decides and the wife carries out his will. The *Franklin's Tale* shows that the glorious ideal has its limits and in this imperfect world it cannot be carried out quite like in the world of romances. Dorigen is a realistic character, as a woman she is moved not only to pity when she sees suffering, but also to fear when she loves. And her fear motivates her to make rash and wrong decisions. But while a man is granted another chance to improve his decisions, Dorigen as a woman is deprived of her sovereignty so that she does not make another mistake. The ideals in the Franklin's tale give way to the medieval reality.

#### 4.2 The *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*: the Christian Ideal

The ideal woman of a Christian exemplum is a mere vessel to be filled by God's grace and to demonstrate a Christian virtue. Women in Chaucer's exempla are as noble and beautiful as the courtly heroines are but the text does not focus on these qualities. The characters are not as complex as in other tales, there is a clear distinction between "good" and "evil" characters. There is one major "good" hero – or, in this case, heroine – in each tale and this character carries the Christian virtue to its utmost level. The extremity of these tales, "tales of pathos" as Frank calls them (143), makes it extremely difficult for a modern reader to identify with the positive heroines because "[t]here is little or no complexity. Characters are generally one- or two-dimensional, motivated by a single virtue: constancy, patience, simple piety" (ibid). Although Kolve argues for Constance's humanity within the frame of Christian exempla, the genre itself does not allow much space for humanity and weaknesses of the positive characters. In his opinion, it is therefore easier for today's reader to identify with the "evil" characters who show a larger complexity of thought and deed. But for the medieval mind, these stories were not so unbelievable, they were a demonstration of the glory of the Church, just as romances portrayed the splendour of courtly life. Moreover, these stories, like the saints' lives, were often presented as histories, which added credibility to them (Kolve, 298).

In the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*, the heroines are noble most of all by their Christian spirit. They are both beautiful women who surrender their will to God's plan and trust in His protection. They are subjected to trials and they never falter in their beliefs. Both of them, though, stay passive throughout the course of the tales. Chaucer's treatment of saintly heroines is different when the story is told by a male narrator. Kolve suggests that one of



Chaucer's probable sources for the tale of Constance was Trevelyan's *Chronicles* where the story is translated. But Chaucer's treatment of the heroine is different than that of his source: Trevelyan's Constance is far more active than Chaucer's Constance (Kolve), she is a preacher like Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale*. It seems typical of Chaucer that while he concentrates on the passages of Cecilia's active preaching even more than his source, he suppresses the same activity in the tale of Constance; this disparity in treatment of similar subjects aims at showing the male narrator's attitude as opposed to the female narrator's one. The *Second Nun's Tale* shows to some extent women's ambitions, tries to prove that women can be equally powerful – at least spiritually – as men. The narrator's point of view seems to show even more clearly when compared to the tale of Constance in which the male narrator has no wish to show women's strength. Both Constance of the *Man of Law's Tale* and Griselda of the *Clerk's Tale* are outstandingly passive heroines when compared with Cecilia. Both of them are, as Frank puts it, typical heroines of tales of pathos, "beautiful, saintly, innocent, helpless, victimized" (151). Their only solace is God's power to guide and protect them. The same definition could apply to Cecilia except that she is not helpless. Constance and Griselda's faith is passive, they are virtually set adrift with no direction except which God gives them. They submit to the masculine dominance of the Church and patriarchal system of belief. Cecilia also follows the direction God gives her but she is not passive, she is victorious. She does not submit to male dominance, she challenges the masculine authorities. Cecilia's faith is an active crusade, not passive submission. And that is essentially the difference between stories of the same genre told by men and women.

#### 4.2.1 The *Man of Law's Tale*

The story starts with Syrian merchants travelling to Rome and learning about the beauty and goodness of Constance, the Emperor's daughter. When the merchants tell their Sultan about her, he is impressed and decides to marry the lady. At this point, the narrator interrupts the story, as he does once more on Constance's first journey, to say that the stars were adverse to this match and that a human fate can be predicted if only humans were perceptive enough to read signs:

In that large book that overhangs the earth  
 And people call the heavens, it well may be  
 That it was written in his stars at birth  
 Love was to be his death; for certainly  
 The death of every man is there to see  
 Patterned in stars clearer than in a glass,  
 Could one but read how all will come to pass (CT, 144).

The fatality of the tale's progress is highlighted and Constance's future is treated as already given. When Constance arrives in Syria, it is on a ship filled with bishops and Roman nobility. Her fate is already decided by one of the two evil mother archetypes in the story – the Sultan's mother. The Sultanness pretends to accept Christianity but in fact struggles to keep her faith, and during a feast her followers kill all the Christians, including the newly baptized Sultan, except Constance, who is put in a rudderless ship with an undefined amount of supplies. It may seem strange that out of the mass of Christians, Constance was saved. This miraculous salvation from death served to show God's mercy that acts even through the acts of pagans. It was not difficult

for the medieval reader to consider such a course of events possible, as setting adrift was not so unusual a punishment:

Persons were most often set adrift for one of three reasons: when guilt could not be conclusively determined by human investigation, when men wished to combine severity with some possibility of mercy, or when, as in the case of Custance, society wished to expel an unwanted person from its midst. The Christian instances assume that God is sole arbiter of guilt and innocence, and the sea merely an instrument through which He expresses His judgement (Kolve, 326).

Of course, as Constance was not set adrift in a Christian country and as she was set adrift precisely because of her religion, the notion of guilt does not apply to her. She sailed for three years before being cast ashore in Northumbria where she is protected by the Constable and his wife. She converts the couple but the narrative only gives little space to their conversion and virtually none to Constance's preaching. All this time, Constance is chaste and perfect, and also a virgin. A young knight desires her and when he cannot have her, he kills the Constable's wife and Constance is accused. When she is brought to court, God strikes the guilty knight dead. Alla, King of Northumbria, is converted and marries Constance. But his motives are the very opposite of the Sultan's. While the Sultan decides to be baptized in order to get Constance, Alla is prompted by God's power to marry Constance: "Then Jesus in his mercy caused the King/ To wed this holy maiden" (CT, 159). And while the Sultan would probably be perceived as rightfully punished for his wrong motives, the medieval Christian could only approve of Alla's actions.

At this point of the story, the second evil mother character appears. Alla has to leave for a battle in Scotland, Constance gives birth to a boy, and Alla's mother fakes both a letter to the

king and his answer so that the king learns that his son is “some horrible fiend” and Constance learns that she is to be setadrift again, this time together with the child. This terrible treason, a typical fairy-tale motif, happens in a castle at Knaresborough in both Trevelyan and Gower, as Edwards notes in his essay “Knaresborough Castle and ‘The Kynges Modres Court’”. But he explains that although Knaresborough was the hiding place of Beckett’s murderers and thus very appropriate for the frame of *The Canterbury Tales*, it was impossible for Chaucer to mention the place. Chaucer’s patron, John of Gaunt, was the owner of Knaresborough, and when he was accused of treason by the government, he had to hide in the Knaresborough castle with his wife Constance (Edwards, 83-88).

Constance is set adrift again, again she accepts God’s will. Alla returns and has his mother executed but Constance is already at sea. Once more, Constance is attacked by a man who wants to lie with her, once more he is killed miraculously, and finally Constance ends up in Rome. She remains unrecognized until her husband comes as a pilgrim, then a happy reunion is described, and Constance boards a ship again. This time, though, she knows where she is going, she returns to England with her husband, as an obedient wife. She is no longer subjected only to God’s will, in the end she has to submit her will to her husband who mediates a woman’s relation to God. Constance’s final sea journey is back to Rome when her husband dies. Thus she makes a journey, as God’s missionary, around the world: “The geography of the poem becomes itself an icon, a mental image incorporating much of what was known of the Western world” (Kolve, 302).

Constance spends most of her life in ships, in fact, “[t]he dominant image is of Constance at sea in a rudderless ship (‘a ship al steereless’), the unseen but trusted pilot of which is God” (Stone, 50). Her ship, even without the bishops of the first journey, symbolises the Church, a

firm ground in the masses of water, saving faith in the world of chaos and evil. Constance does not only lack the means to steer her ship, she also lacks the will. She is completely passive, her fate is determined. But her fate is not in the hands of unstable Fortune, it is in the hands of God, and all her journeys have a good cause. Constance is God's instrument to bring profit, to multiply faith. But she is not an active instrument. There are merely two suggestions in the tale that she converted someone by her speech. In both cases it is only a notion and there is no actual speech where Constance could prove her spiritual power. Her major strength lies in remaining faithful during all her trials:

The key to the religious sense of the *Man of Law's Tale* is the heroine's absolute refusal, even by such a small act as declaring who she is, to take any step to save herself: God must do everything: produce miraculous food, deliver condemning blows, stir the minds of others to virtue and compassion and, archetypal of all, steer her soul's boat (Stone, 52).

Constance's passivity is really a feature of the female ideal. Passivity is expected of a woman, she is assigned various roles in her life by the male authorities and she is never asked about her will. Constance, with her submission to anything that happens, her acceptance of any position she finds herself in, and her never failing belief that God will use her in the best possible way, is a perfect example to be set before any medieval woman. Constance is even human to a certain degree, just enough to make her credible but still ideal: "Constance is allowed to fear, to suffer, and once even to despair" (Kolve, 304). Her feelings are acknowledged but she does not act upon them, nor are they given any further importance. Constance in her loneliness and devotion is thus an example for aristocratic women who are, like Constance, likely to be treated as goods by the male authorities, never asked about their consent:

Custance embodies Chaucer's perception of the isolation of women in his day – or of upper-class women at least – and his sense of its poignancy. [...] Used as counters in the games of power politics an economic manoeuvre, separated, possibly forever, from friends and family to marry, often, men they had never seen in countries totally alien, queens, duchesses, and ladies, whom the narrator appeals to for understanding of Custance's isolation, very probably would have understood all too well. And Chaucer here, and in the *Clerk's Tale*, seems to have understood too (Frank, 152).

Whether compassion with mistreated noble women was one of Chaucer's goals or not, it is clear that Constance's name is symbolic of her fate and that she is presented as a life-like example for other women to follow. The story serves to encourage the Christian spirit of faith, show that there is a larger plan even behind the sorrows of a human life. Sorrow and joy alternate and the Man of Law expresses hope that sorrow may always be followed by joy in the lives of the company as it followed in Constance's tale. Constance's life is shown as eventually happy. She is an example to imitate and a reward is promised to those who are like her in this life as well as in the life to come.

#### 4.2.2 The *Clerk's Tale*

The *Clerk's Tale* of Griselda, her humility and wifely obedience might be even more difficult for the modern reader to accept. Griselda totally abandons her will and follows her husband's directions only. For the medieval mind, the story was not a mere religious allegory – Griselda was another example to praise in front of one's own wife. The Merchant's reaction to the Clerk's story proves that even despite the ending and Chaucer's envoy to the story explaining it as a religious allegory, the audience would be likely to perceive Griselda as an

example of wifely perfection. And, indeed, such a story would not be as exceptional in the Middle Ages as the reader might consider it nowadays. Frank speaks about the medieval life conditions suggesting that Griselda's story was rather trustworthy to its original audience: "Humility and subservience on one side, arrogance and outrageous demand on the other were often the order of the day in a society so hierarchical" (157).

The tale is shielded by the authority of Petrarch from whom the Clerk claims to have learned his story. The story begins with an image of a marquis who is a good ruler of his lands, "[h]onoured and dreaded" and "[b]eloved alike by nobleman and peasant" (*CT*, 340). The only fault his vassals find in him is that he rather inclines to courtly leisures than to more serious matters like marriage. When they finally persuade the marquis Walter to get married, he says he will only marry whom he chooses and demands complete obedience of his servants in this matter:

Leave me alone to choose myself a wife,  
 That is my burden, my prerogative.  
 But I command you, charge you on your life,  
 That whomsoever I choose, you are to give  
 All honour to her, long as she may live,  
 In word and deed, here and elsewhere, no less  
 Than to an emperor's daughter or princess.  
 And over this you furthermore shall swear  
 Never to grumble, never to check or strive  
 Against my choice, if I am to impair  
 My personal liberty that you may thrive

Where I have set my heart I mean to wive;

If you withhold consent as to this latter

I beg you'll speak no more upon the matter (*CT*, 343).

Walter demands the self-same obedience from his wife when he chooses her. Griselda is the poorest girl in Walter's land but she is beautiful, virtuous, and her nobility is in her character. Stone suggests that Griselda qualifies as a Christian heroine of Chaucer's tale precisely by her appearance, a feature disconnected with the message of the tale: "The *Clerk's Tale* exhibits Chaucer's overwhelming preference, when writing for the religious or moral edification of his public, for his exemplar of virtue to be a beautiful woman" (95). Griselda is both beautiful and virtuous in order to increase the dramatic effect of the tale. Her moral strength is increased by defying her feminine fragility.

Walter's subjects cannot dare to disobey their master and, being one of them, Griselda never questions Walter's decision to marry her. Walter is the supreme authority in the land, and once Griselda's father agreed to the match, she does not have the slightest thought to oppose the male authorities who decide about her future. Hinckley comments on the situation: "In her own eyes, Griselda is always first and foremost, not a wife, but a serf" (220). Her loyalty to the ruler of the country comes before her rights of a daughter and wife. Walter's demand that she should always obey and never as much as frown against his will is outrageous and could never be carried out should his wife be an aristocrat. Chaucer clearly presents it as an exceptional course of events and throughout the text he criticises Walter for his actions. Wetherbee notes this as a disparity between Chaucer's version and that of his source: "A blunt disapproval of Walter's conduct distinguishes his version of the story from Petrarch's" (93).



Once they are happily married, Griselda is a paragon of wifely virtues and Walter decides to test her. His tests would be too harsh for any woman to withstand but Griselda is the Christian ideal, and just like Constance, she relies on God's protection. She is not put on trials by God himself but the power of husband over wife is comparable to the power of God over his believers. Griselda's story begins where Constance's story ends – with submission to the husband. Frank aligns these women by their isolation from the known world "She is another of Chaucer's isolated women, isolated by her poverty, her low birth, her vows of obedience to her husband, her separations [from her children], her firmness, her suffering" (156).

Walter takes away their two children and pretends to have them killed. This trial is hard for any woman to undertake, as her role in the Middle Ages is primarily that of a wife and mother. When Griselda suffers this hardship without a single tear or word against her lord, he decides to pretend to divorce her and marry an aristocrat who is, in fact, his daughter. Griselda is expelled from the palace and then asked to come again and decorate the palace for the wedding. Griselda does as she is commanded, always keeping her promise always to obey her master's "lightest whim and pleasure," to "show/ A willing heart, ungrudging, night or day" (CT, 348). The Clerk compares Griselda to Job, her suffering is just as undeserved and she is just as patient and humble as the Old Testament character. When Walter asks Griselda what she thinks about his bride, she is closest to expressing her own opinion. First, she praises the girl's beauty and wishes the couple happiness but she also adds that this lady, not being used to hardships of poverty, would deem it much more difficult to cope with such tests as Griselda herself had undergone:

'One thing I beg of you, and warn you too,

Never to goad her, never put on trial

This tender girl as I have known you do;  
 For she was fostered precious, a vial  
 More delicate. I think the self-denial  
 Adversity might force on her would be  
 Harder for her to suffer than for me' (*CT*, 368).

Griselda's reproach is too mild to be recognized, it is only a hint of her own will. Throughout the story, she willingly resigns her own decisions. That is why Martin considers her a more powerful Christian icon than Constance: "Constance's version of saintliness is to accept what God sends and her pain and fear in doing so are always evident. Griselda's vocation is a yet more arduous task of unselfing, of actively making over her will in the image of another" (144). Wetherbee, on the other hand, suggests that an intent reader may find signs of Griselda's assertion that she does not internalize her husband's wishes for her own. Or rather that when these wishes become too outrageous she is willing to obey but does not consider them her own will:

Griselde, while she never abandons her ikon-like passivity, shows a growing awareness of her situation. At first her outward behaviour and her private feelings are indistinguishable: 'This will is in my heart,' she declares as she gives up her daughter. But she later speaks of free chase ('my will and all my liberty') as something she left at home with her peasant clothing: what constrains her now is the letter of her obligation to Walter, the duty of conforming her will to his in every detail in 'word or work' (Wetherbee, 92).

But Griselda's obedience is untainted. She does not act against her master's wishes, and does not even show her dissatisfaction with her fate. All the suggestions even an intent reader could find are mere hints. Never does Griselda openly take a stance opposing her husband and lord.

Walter, seeing his wife's perfection even when she did not think about herself as his wife any longer, reveals to Griselda the truth and introduces her to her children. The dramatic reunion ends up with Walter's promise never to test Griselda again and the narrator reveals the true reason why he tells this story:

'This story does not mean it would be good  
 For wives to ape Griseld's humility,  
 It would be unendurable they should.  
 But everybody in his own degree  
 Should be as perfect in his constancy  
 As was Griselda.' That is why Petrarch chose  
 To tell her story in his noble prose.  
 For since a woman showed such patience to  
 A mortal man, how much the more we ought  
 To take in patience all that God may do! (CT, 371)

The religious dimension of the story is only emphasized at the end. Till that very moment the reader has to feel deeply disturbed by Walter's cruelty. Even the medieval mind, while knowing that such a story would indeed be possible, considered Griselda's fate very harsh. The Clerk himself emphasizes the fact that women like Griselda are hard to find and it is not the objective of his tale to inspire men to testing of their wives. Frank comments on the religious message of the tale, showing that it had precisely the dramatic effect that the medieval Church employed very often in services and teaching:

Its appeal six hundred years ago can best be understood, first, by reference to the high value that religious teaching placed on humility, obedience, and patience, the virtues

Griselda displays so abundantly. [...] Her story dramatized for them the teaching that God tests his people. The tragedies of life are evidence enough for that. And it dramatized the humility required of the truly devout before God and the absolute obedience demanded in the face of that testing, a humility and obedience that frail mortality found difficult and, often, impossible (155).

The tale's major message is to serve as a religious allegory but it treats marriage in great detail. That is why Kittredge places the *Clerk's Tale* in the marriage group and considers it as a part of a larger whole, indeed, as a reaction to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*:

*The Clerk is answering the Wife of Bath*; he is telling of a woman whose principles in marriage were the antithesis of hers; he is reasserting the orthodox view in opposition to the heresy which she had expounded with such zest and with so many flings and jeers at the clerkly profession and character (198, original italics).

According to Kittredge the tale is recognizable by the medieval audience as such a reaction. But he does not prove his theory by a complex view of the text. He ignores the fact that the Clerk himself professes that his tale is a religious allegory. In addition, Kittredge elaborates on the Clerk's character beyond the description of the *General Prologue* and considers him personally offended by the Wife's tale. Hinckley proves by means of the text that Kittredge's theory cannot be taken too seriously:

But let us turn to the sequence of Wife and Clerk, as to the nature of which I believe Professor Kittredge to be seriously in error. [...] That Our Host, in introducing the Clerk, makes absolutely no reference or allusion either to Sittingbourne or to the Summoner is strong presumptive evidence that Chaucer did not intend the *Clerk's Tale* immediately to follow the Summoner's (218).

Furthermore, Hinckley argues that if the Clerk really felt offended by the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, he would have to feel the same way about other tales that show disrespect to clerks and then it would be strange for his reaction to apply only to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. By quoting the text of the tales, Hinckley proves that “[u]ntil we reach the casual reference to ‘the Wyves love of Bath’ the *Clerk's Tale* is absolutely and demonstrably uncoordinated with the *Wife of Bath*” (219). Hinckley’s whole theory is supported by his claim that “[i]t is not even Griselda’s position as a wife that is intended to interest us. The moral of her story has nothing to do with matrimony” (220). That, indeed, is true but none of the tales told by male narrators has its primary goal in depicting marital issues. Yet many of them depict marriage and women’s position in society in great detail. In fact, only the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is seriously concerned only with marriage without a larger purpose than to explore the role of women in medieval society. The *Clerk's Tale* can therefore easily be placed within the “marriage group” but it can hardly be considered a direct reaction to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

Griselda, just like Constance, is an ideal image of a Christian woman. She is an impersonation of virtues, not a plausible human being, and she is acknowledged as such. Griselda is beautiful, virtuous, and can endure any hardship. Both Constance and Griselda are meant to serve as an example of Christian behaviour both for men and women. Yet both, being women, are taken as examples of virtuous feminine behaviour by the medieval audience. The Christian ideal in Chaucer’s tales is primarily an allegory. Chaucer’s heroines, though, retain their humanity to a certain degree. Thus they are both impersonations of Christian virtues and plausible medieval examples at the same time.

#### 4.3 The *Miller's Tale*, The *Shipman's Tale*: No Ideal at All

The tales of the Miller and the Shipman are “churls’ tales,” as Chaucer himself calls them, which means they are considered unfit for a refined aristocratic audience. Yet, in the concept of *The Canterbury Tales* they have their irreplaceable role. The image of not only women, but marriage as a whole, that these stories present portrays the viewpoint of the uneducated masses. Life is not so serious in the churls’ tales, it is comical, and the situations marriage may bring about are a matter of laughter. Both the *Miller's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* are fabliaux – coarse stories filled with vulgar actions, dealing primarily with marital unfaithfulness. In these stories, the husband is usually an old man who married a young woman. Such a man is a traditionally satirized character and the wife is therefore not judged for following her nature and finding a lover or submitting to a persistent suitor. Honour is not a very important issue for the working classes. The Miller even suggest that there is no reason to care about the wife’s surplus of sexual energy as long as the husband gets his own share, which is, as Martin puts it, “another parody of a more spiritual attitude” (70). The wives of the stories are left unpunished for moral breaches because the high morals of the romances and exempla is missing completely in the fabliaux. The world of the fabliaux is the natural one, unconstrained by ideals of the court and not much influenced by the ideals of the Church:

Characters in such stories live, for the most part, as though no moral imperatives existed beyond those intrinsic to the moment. They inhabit a world of cause and effect, pragmatic error and pragmatic punishment, that admits no goals beyond self-gratification, revenge, or

social laughter – the comedic celebration of any selfishness clever enough to succeed (Kolve, 160).

The fabliaux present a certain *joie de vivre*, characters do not create artificial moral problems for themselves. The only true problem in the fabliau world is money and once the characters have enough to live comfortably, they enjoy their lives. The women of the stories are aware that extramarital relationships are not an example to follow, and they even put up symbolic resistance. However, the major problem with their affairs is not that they are immoral, but rather that they should not be discovered. An affair with a lover is not a question of *trouthe* or honour, it does not ruin a good marriage, not even as much as influence the relationship of the married couple. The old husbands are blind to their wives' love affairs, the wives do not feel the need to reveal such a relationship. There are no chaste Cecilias, truthful Dorigens, or obedient Griseldas in the fabliaux.

Women in these tales are aware that they are treated as property and they use this status to their advantage. The wives are meant to represent the social success and well-being of their husbands and so they do. But, as the *Shipman's Tale* suggests, this means that the husbands have to buy new dresses for their wives and give them enough money for proper display. The wife is capable of turning her wishes into the man's demands of representation. Women in the fabliaux are very plausible characters, they have understandable and realistic wishes and needs; they manipulate their husbands but are themselves manipulated by their lovers. The fabliau women are possibly the most modern characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. Their lifestyle is close to modern pragmatism. These characters are unbound by medieval Christian morality, which makes them appealing to a modern mind.

#### 4.3.1 The *Miller's Tale*

The *Miller's Tale* follows the *Knight's Tale* as a direct reaction. The Miller knows that he is drunk, yet he asserts that he knows a story comparable to the Knight's: "By blood and bones and belly, / I've got a noble story I can tell 'ee, / I'll pay the Knight his wages, not the Monk" (CT, 103). When he sums up his tale before the beginning, an argument breaks out between him and the Reeve who suggests that there are many noble stories and that a story which does not scandalize anyone should be told. The Miller means no offence by his story, he explains, and insists on telling it. And indeed, there is a good reason – the *Miller's Tale* is a parody of the *Knight's Tale*. Alison, the wife of the tale, is described as a lady of a romance, equal importance is imparted to her attire, and to her youth and natural beauty. She has two suitors, just like Emily of the *Knight's Tale*, but she does not actually choose between them, she is manipulated into a situation when one becomes her lover. The male elder in the story is not the firm and decisive Theseus or any such character but a gullible carpenter John, Alison's husband. He has the ultimate power over his wife. But the difference is in the morality of the tales. While the *Knight's Tale* shows the courtly manners with morally impeccable attitudes, the *Miller's Tale* depicts the pragmatism summed up before by its narrator:

One shouldn't be too inquisitive in life  
 Either about God's secrets or one's wife.  
 You'll find God's plenty all you could desire;  
 Of the remainder, better not enquire (CT, 104).



In the romance, every action and its implications have to be crystal clear so that the reader can see how perfect the characters are; in the fabliau every action needs to be opaque to its utmost, especially to other characters. Every action of the fabliau is uncondemned – and thus considered harmless – unless someone else finds out. Pearsall highlights the connection between the two stories by linking their genres:

The association of fabliau with romance needs a word more said about it, since the two literary forms seem to exist in a complementary relationship. Romance asserts the possibility that men may behave in a noble and self-transcending manner; fabliau declares the certainty that they will always behave like animals. [...] Romance and fabliau complement one another, and Chaucer encourages us to look at them thus by setting the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale* side by side (129).

The tale is set in Oxford and the very first description the reader is given is that of a student named Nicholas. A rich old carpenter takes a lodger in his household, a gallant student whose major interests are astrology and seducing women. Only later does the reader find out that the carpenter has a young beautiful wife and that he is a jealous man. While there are elaborate descriptions of Nicholas and Alison, John the carpenter is merely a sketch, his features are mentioned to be those of a stock cuckold husband. He is rich, therefore has actually no need to let the room and expose his wife to temptation. He is old and, as such, he should also be wise but “His wits were dull, he'd fallen in the snare/ And had to bear the cross as others bear” (*CT*, 106). When the reader sets the character of old John in a familiar frame, an elaborate description of Alison follows. Her clothing is described in detail, and, as Pearsall suggests, it plays an important part in the parodic function of the tale:

The quality of lyricism in the tale is further enhanced by its exuberant travesty of courtly language and behaviour. It is a very 'literary' fabliau. The elaborate description of Alison, for instance, comes just at the point where the heroine would be described in a romance, and it is a beautifully observed parody of the conventional top-to-toe inventory (131). But at the same time it is emphasized that she is young, fresh, and wild like an animal. Both Alison and Nicholas can sing sweetly, they are matched in their abilities just as they are matched in appearance.

In the vivid exchange that follows when the husband leaves for work, it is obvious that Nicholas does not give as much as a thought to a possible failure of his business. He catches Alison boldly by the crotch and demands that she should make love to him at once. He claims he loves her so much that if he does not have her immediately, he shall die. But rather than like a lover about to die for his love, Nicholas looks like a spoiled brat who has to have his new toy immediately no matter the circumstances. This is too much even for the world where morality has no viable role and Alison refuses him right away. Only then does the youth start to court his desired object more properly:

Then Nicholas began to plead his cause

And spoke so fair in proffering what he could

That in the end she promised him she would,

Swearing she'd love him, with a solemn promise (*CT*, 107).

Nicholas' belligerent love is an equivalent of Arcita's passion bent more on victory than on the actual love of the lady. Of course, Nicholas' adversary, Absolon the clerk, is not a real match for Nicholas, he is close to Alison only at church and she has no wish to give in to his charms. His description is similar to Alison's – his clothing is elaborate, he is young and fresh. But

when compared with Nicholas, Absolon is capable of being useful: “He knew how to let blood, cut hair and shave,/ And draw up legal deeds” (*CT*, 108). Absolon in his longing for love is a parody of Palamon. To him, the desired woman is more like a goddess than a human figure. He proves this attitude when in the final scene he kneels to accept her kiss. But his pretensions are shown as unfit for the world where he practises them. Absolon is not a knight and the bourgeois world is not a place for elaborate courtship. Wetherbee also comments on the parody of the *Knight's Tale* focusing on the similarity of characters:

The Miller is the most genial of the churls, and the vehicle of his criticism is parody, aimed at the Knight's treatment of his love story. He balances the chivalry of Arcite with the aggressive ingenuity of the student Nicholas [...] The skittish dandyism of Absolon, which gives way so abruptly and unexpectedly to violent action, recalls the uneasy relation of religiosity and reckless anger in Palamon. And the stereotypical Emily is eclipsed by the vivid description of Alisoun, a superb parody of the courtly rhetoric in which the details of form and attire, far from reducing her charms to emblems of modesty and virtue, focus our interest on her lively physical presence (56-57).

Alison repeats that her husband is jealous and as the situation evolves, she conditions her promise to love Nicholas. He has to trick her husband so that John does not start to suspect the couple. If the trick is carried out properly, she will lie with the student. Nicholas then concocts an ingenious plot. He pretends to be in trance in his room and see signs in the stars. He tells the gullible carpenter that a second flood of the world is coming, even worse than Noah's Flood. The “jealous” husband does not act like a jealous character. On realizing the terrible future and his own promise never to tell anyone once the student told him, he is only worried what would happen to his beloved wife:

The carpenter exclaimed, 'Alas, my wife!

My little Alison! Is she to drown?'

And in his grief he very near fell down (*CT*, 113-114).

John does not think about the Scriptural promise that no second flood would ever come, he does not see through Nicholas' deceit, he only wants to save his wife. Although he is described as a jealous husband at the beginning of the story and then again by his wife, he does not have the slightest suspicion that Alison might be unfaithful. Kolve notices this disparity of description and actions of the character:

Although the tale occasionally terms old John 'jalous' or speaks of his 'jalousie,' his actions do not support that characterization in the ways we might expect. The marriage may indeed seem a cage to Alisoun, but it does so by definition, not by virtue of special bars or locks attached by a suspicious husband (188).

Kolve later on comments again on the love of the husband for his wife which, in its turn, ends up punished. John as a traditionally suspicious character is not suspicious at all and that causes his destruction: "The absence of any other concern will in time earn him a fall, but this care for her keeps him attractive and sympathetic as well. Overfondness for one's wife is, in fabliau terms, a mistake, but it is not ugly" (Kolve, 207). Of course, the fall is purely symbolical, between the characters, half of the truth remains always hidden. Only the reader knows the whole story.

The denouement of the tale is comic and indeed a cause for social laughter. While John sleeps in a provisional "arch," a tub which he carved for himself – and two more for Nicholas and Alison – prepared for the flood to come, Nicholas and Alison are enjoying themselves downstairs. Absolon comes wooing and Alison has the brilliant idea to expose her bum instead

of her cheek to the persistent suitor. When Absolon realizes he was tricked, he goes to the nearby smithy and borrows a red-hot coulter. He comes to Alison's window and asks for another kiss. This time, it is Nicholas' buttocks that are stuck out of the window and branded with the coulter. When Nicholas cries out for water, John wakes up, hacks off the hanging tubs and breaks his arm. By this time, all the neighbours are wide awake. Nicholas and Alison, to save their face, pronounce old John mad, and the whole neighbourhood laughs at his lunacy about the flood. The time of symbolic punishment comes for everyone but Alison. John is punished for his overdone affection to his wife, Absolon is punished for his pretensions unsuited to the world he lives in, and Nicholas is punished for not knowing when to stop his tricks on others:

Nicholas's wit and vitality carry all before them, but his downfall comes when he tries to repeat the trick Alison played on Absolon: this is a lapse from the high standard of cunning and inventiveness we expect of him, and he is duly punished. Absolon deserves his moment of triumph. Alison, by contrast, escapes scot-free, and quite properly so, according to the laws of the comic fabliau, not because she has done nothing wrong but because she has done nothing that betrays her nature (Pearsall, 132).

It is only interesting that while the Miller thinks no explanation is needed for the punishments of Nicholas and Absolon, he closes the story by reminding his audience again that the carpenter was punished for his jealousy: "That's how the carpenter's young wife was plumbed/ For all the tricks his jealousy could try" (*CT*, 122). John's jealousy indeed could try but it did not. Except for Alison's feeling that she is kept in a cage, there is not a single proof within the story that John actually is a jealous husband.

Alison escapes her punishment not only because she follows the laws of the genre, but also because she is constantly pushed by male authorities. The reader sees her first as a young woman married to an old man, doubtless it is not her own will but her father's. Although she is depicted as unfit for her role, she accepts it and seems to be a good wife even in the first exchange with Nicholas when she refuses him. It is difficult to judge, though, whether she refuses him out of principle, or because he treats her merely as an object to be had. When she is finally persuaded, the reader senses that it were not only Nicholas' words and his cunning that made her change opinion, but also his physical strength. Throughout the tale, Alison is never actually making her own decision. She is a splendid example of a fabliau woman. She is manipulated, decisions are made for her, she is perceived as an object by the male world that surrounds her. The compensation she is offered is that no fault is found with her. Although the woman is not treated as a symbol of perfection and virtues, she is not treated as a complex being either. Women of the fabliaux are more realistic portraits of humans, yet they are still treated like objects. On the spirit-matter scale, the exempla and romances depict the spirit, the fabliaux focus on the matter. In none of the genres is woman the combination of both.

#### 4.3.2 The *Shipman's Tale*

The tale has a rather ambiguous opening which makes critics assume that this story was originally meant for the Wife of Bath. The narrator identifies herself when she includes herself among the women who are paid by silly husbands:

The silly husband always has to pay,

He has to clothe us, he has to array

Our bodies to enhance his reputation,  
 While we dance round in all this decoration.  
 And if he cannot pay, as it may chance,  
 Or won't submit to such extravagance,  
 Thinking his money thrown away and lost,  
 Then someone else will have to bear the cost  
 Or lend us money, and that's dangerous (*CT*, 174).

But there the identification ends and further on the narrator is switched to a male character, the Shipman. Windeatt notices this change: “The *Shipman's Tale* – probably originally told by the Wife of Bath – has been shifted to its new teller without revision of the internal signs of a female teller” (204). And Stone further suggests that the story was not originally meant to be told by a male character, since

at least the first few lines are not told by a man – certainly not the Shipman, who would probably know little of the world of the story, though the immorality of the characters lies parallel to his own and the sardonic brevity of the narration also seems appropriate – but by a woman (54).

The brevity of the story and the lack of narrative adornments are the probable causes of the lack of critical interest in the story. If the Wife of Bath told this story of marital unfaithfulness and struggle for money in a marriage, she would presumably lose much of the attention critics devote to her. This story would definitely not create such a gap between the violence of her prologue and lyricism of her tale. Although the *Shipman's Tale* is not as complex as other stories, nor is it as interesting with its stock topic of a young wife who wants to be amused and

old husband who cares about his money more than about his wife, it still has its charms, as

Benson argues:

Some critics have also dismissed the *Shipman's Tale*, mistaking its individual, understated artistry for inferiority. The work lacks some of the successful literary elements of Chaucer's other fabliaux only because its special accomplishments lie elsewhere, especially in the long dialogue of seduction between wife and monk whose subtlety is unmatched elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales* (107).

While the *Miller's Tale* is sumptuous in details and descriptions with a minimalist seduction scene, the *Shipman's Tale* is a sketch with an extremely elaborate seduction dialogue.

The story is set in France, which is appropriate for a Shipman as a narrator, and the lack of adornments in the narrative, as already said, is another feature fit for the Shipman. While the actual descriptions of characters are dealt with within one or two lines, their handling of money is elaborated on. The master of the household is a merchant, a thrifty man, his important moments are the ones when he is in his counting-house. When his own wife characterizes him in a parody of a confession, she suggests that he would rather spend a night with his money-bags than with her. She starts with saying it is not becoming for her to speak of their private life, "in bed or any other place," but nevertheless she goes on to say:

I know a wife should only speak in honour  
 About her husband, or else fie upon her!  
 Only to you, the only one on earth,  
 This much I'll say. God help me, he's not worth  
 A fly upon the wall! In no respect (*CT*, 178).



But as the reader can see from what follows, the wife is not so much interested in the husband's affection as she is in his money. The monk to whom the wife "confesses" is a friend of the family and the very opposite of the old stingy husband. His generosity to the whole household is, no doubt, a good reason for the husband to keep up their relationship and even pretend they are cousins:

This monk Sir John was very free in spending  
 Whenever he stayed there, carefully attending  
 To what should please; he poured out tips like wages,  
 Forgetting not the meanest of the pages  
 About the house; to each in his degree,  
 Master or man, he gave a gift or fee  
 Whenever he came – some honest kind of present -  
 And so, to them, his coming was as pleasant  
 As sunrise is to bird upon the nest (CT, 175).

Chaucer makes it very clear that the world of the *Shipman's Tale* revolves around money. It is therefore not surprising that the plot of the story is a simple one of trickery done with the husband's money. The wife confesses to the monk that her husband is mean and unwilling to give her a hundred francs for a new dress. The monk promises to lend her this exact sum of money. But of course, the wife cannot borrow with an outlook of paying back, and the kisses exchanged between the couple prepare the reader for the following exchange of the "loan" for a sexual affair. The seduction scene is elaborately constructed to resemble a confession with the monk promising he would not tell a living soul and the wife asserting she could not repeat these things to anyone else. The problem the wife poses is solved, the confession is happily over and

they can leave the garden together in harmony. It is interesting to notice that the wife and the monk are not alone during the carefully constructed seduction, as the narrator tells his audience:

This excellent wife then stealthily came out  
 Where he was walking softly in the sun  
 And greeted him, as she had often done.  
 A little girl was there for company  
 Beside her, under her authority,  
 Still subject to the rod (*CT*, 176).

This girl is not mentioned again in the tale and it seems unimportant that she is there at all. But the girl creates a semblance of moral cover for what is going on. She is still small and does not perceive the underlying tone of money-sex exchange in the conversation. For the adults who read the conversation, the girl functions as some sort of insurance that nothing extremely immoral would be done within the sight of a child. As Pearsall, not suggesting that the child is one of the causes, puts it

[e]veryone is politely diplomatic, careful not to offend and not to reveal any real purpose or feeling. The scene between the wife and the monk in the garden is a beautifully decorous comedy of manners, with each delicate advancement towards mutual understanding carefully planned and signalled (135).

The little girl also supports another Pearsall's theory that "no-one seems very much upset by what happens" (135). She has another function as well, as Martin suggests – she ensures the continuance of female treatment of money, and their own sexuality as goods to be exchanged for money: "What she is doing in the garden is, of course, listening and the lessons she learns there will presumably reappear in her own adult life" (88). The girl does not understand what is

going on while she is still a child, but should she experience a similar situation in her adult life, it would be clear to her what the implications are. And, having already seen an example of such behaviour, she will not linger with a decision about the exchange.

With the promise of a loan sealed, the couple returns to the house and the merchant is about to leave for business in Bruges. Before he leaves, the monk asks him in private for a loan of a hundred francs for a week or two. The merchant lends the money without hesitation, reminding Sir John to pay him back as soon as he has the money back. The monk comes back with the money as soon as the husband leaves and exchanges the money for a night of pleasure with the wife. As he is a frequent visitor to the house, no one suspects him of unchaste motives:

All night they led a life of busy fun  
 Till dawn came up. Then with a kindly laugh  
 He left, wishing good luck to all the staff,  
 For not a soul, there or in town about,  
 Had formed the least suspicion or slightest doubt  
 Of what had happened (*CT*, 182).

The wife has both the money she wanted and a fresh man in bed. The monk enjoys himself at someone else's expense, and when the husband returns, there is no one to inform him about his wife's activities during his absence. The merchant comes home pleased with himself, "cheers his wife with fun and feast and such" (*CT*, 182) but there is still more business he has to attend to. When he leaves for Paris again, he visits Sir John in his monastery and wants his money back. The monk replies he had already returned it to the wife. Despite this little nuisance, the merchant returns home happily, having earned "a thousand francs, more than he'd spent" (*CT*, 184). It is only at this moment, when the husband is out of debt and his business is going well,

that he is capable of enjoying good food and his wife's attractiveness. Wetherbee maintains that the importance that the husband assigns to his wife is much influenced by his social standing:

His wife is important chiefly as a regulator and essential component of the 'honesty' of his house, the face his life presents to the world, and his vigorous response to her welcome at the end of the story is stimulated as much by his recent success in business as by conjugal affection (68).

When the merchant chides his wife for not telling him about the money from Sir John, she responds as the very opposite of a humble wife. She gets positively angry with the monk and blames him for not telling her that the money was his debt to her husband. This argument is the climax of the story; it is the closest the reader can get to genuine emotions within the tale, the only discourse which is less than decorous. Martin explains the wife's feelings concerning her whole situation: "Unlike the two men, she is simultaneously using and being used, because her sexuality functions as both money and goods" (89). There is, however, no other solution for the wife than to use her body as a form of payment:

She now owes the money to her husband too. But sex comes to rescue again, and she pays her husband in the same coin as she paid the monk. So the hundred francs has gone the rounds, and so has the wife, and no-one seems much the worse for the experience. In fact, there is hardly a ripple on the surface of the suburban life (Pearsall, 136).

The tale does not end up with a resolution, though. The wife is reminded to economize next time and not spend the money foolishly. The husband's attitude does not change, and neither does the wife's one. According to the laws of this fabliau's world, someone else will have to pay for the wife's wishes next time just like someone did this time. The wife is not angry because she went to bed with someone else, she is furious for having been tricked. In the end, it

is the husband who pays for his unwillingness to support his wife according to her wishes. This is stated as a fact at the beginning of the tale, therefore there is no actual development in the general idea of the tale. It is always the husband who pays, or worse. One of the major ideas of the story is the interest in money bordering with obsession. Every character of the tale is depicted in terms of his attitude to money – the husband as thrifty, the lover as generous, the wife as lacking money, and the staff as pleased by tips. The Shipman's world is one where money is essential, more important than morality, more important than love. The treatment of money is a very important trial of a marriage. This point of view is still appealing to a modern reader – the world has not indeed changed much concerning money. The lack of Christian morality is another feature which attracts today's mind.

The wife in the *Shipman's Tale* is a modern woman in the sense that she always finds a way to get what she wants. She is angry when she realizes that she had been tricked but she does not feel any moral obligations to her husband. She does not consider it inappropriate to set her behaviour as an example for a little girl who would probably follow her when she grows up. The wife considers her sexuality a form of payment as good as any other. She is not pushed in a situation when she would have to accept a lover, the monk does not spend any time actually persuading her. The seduction is not openly verbalized, the elaborate dialogue is wittily constructed in hints. While Nicholas of the *Miller's Tale* aggressively verbalizes his desire, the monk of the *Shipman's Tale* openly suggests the night of love only when the first half of the exchange is over. The wife is opposed to Alison of the *Miller's Tale* by the fact that she does make her own decisions. These decisions are, however, bound by the general outlook of a medieval woman. She accepts the male treatment of herself as an object. She uses the fact to her own advantage but the merchant's wife is no fighter for the advancement of women. The

lack of morality in the fabliau shows the life of the individual as easier but, on the other hand, the lack of ideals that goes hand in hand with it causes the impossibility of improvement for the future. Cecilia or the Wife of Bath are women bound by the medieval morality and general line of thought concerning women but they can fight for what they think about as the higher good. The Miller's Alison and the Shipman's wife live only for themselves. Their own lives are easier but women who follow in their footsteps are taught that something like higher good is useless.

## 5. Conclusion

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are a masterpiece giving evidence of medieval life. In their generous scope, the tales portray all social classes, showing individuals occupying their assigned roles more or less successfully. Chaucer's sketches of the *General Prologue*, vivid as they already are, come alive even further in connection with the tales the characters tell the company. Chaucer sums up the society of his age, common knowledge, religiousness, attitudes and prejudices. The women of the *Prologue*, whose tales are told according to their individual features, are wonderfully ambiguous in the roles they assume within the medieval social context. It is often noticed that the Prioress inclines to the courtly tradition and shapes her religious role by an underlying desire for courtly love. Her portrayal in the Prologue does not lack undertones of irony which are further highlighted by the focus of her tale – a little boy and his love to his mother and to the Virgin. The tale ends up in an inappropriate invocation of a contemporary child martyr which further supports the theory of the Prioress as a “misfit”. The Wife of Bath is equally unfit for her role because she does not have any children, nor does she have a husband at the time of the pilgrimage. She assumes the role of a wife because it is impossible for her as a medieval woman to identify herself by means of her trade. The Wife of Bath is, however, a very independent figure with her own money, trade as a clothmaker, and a secure social position. She definitely is subject to the medieval satire of wives – she does not lack a single vice of the list offered by patriarchs or so it seems. The Wife of Bath is a mixture of individual traces and of the standard stereotype of a wife. She knows her situation and, like the fabliau wives, is capable of using even her vices to her advantage. But unlike the fabliau characters, she is far more life-like. She has her dreams and hopes, she is aware of the religious

morality that influences her life – although she knows how to twist it – and she has higher aspirations than enjoying herself; her tale proves that her highest wish is to reform men so that they would be capable of understanding women.

Women tell stories of the same genre as men but their focus shifts towards female self-fulfillment unrestrained by male authorities. All three female narrators in the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* tell tales of “noble” genres – one romance and two saints’ lives. Chaucer presents his female narrators as capable of the same literary achievements as men are. None of the women tells a base tale, and it might be argued that Chaucer does this on purpose as it is assumed that the *Shipman’s Tale* was originally written for the Wife of Bath and only later shifted to its new narrator. Although *The Canterbury Tales* are a mere fragment of a much larger plan, the poet’s goals can be seen even on this smaller scale. Chaucer presents his women as individuals who seek their place in society. They are incapable of embodying either the ideal of a wife or the ideal of a nun; and when they are close to the ideal image, they become invisible like the Second Nun who is overshadowed by the Prioress and her flaws. Yet even these invisible women, about whom the reader cannot decide whether they fulfil the expectations connected with their role, may be dissatisfied with the general conditions women live in. Thus the Second Nun focuses in her tale on a female martyr who defies male authorities except for the supreme authority of God. All three women present worlds void of male authority in their narratives, and each of them chooses a manner that suits her best – the Prioress focuses on the Virgin and her authority over those who adore her; the Second Nun sends her heroine to a victorious battle against her own husband and against the Roman emperor; the Wife of Bath portrays a world consisting mostly of women, where all important decisions are made by women only. Whichever form these narrators choose, it is clear that they feel the need to



express an attitude different from the expected humility and obedience. They feel bound by the male authorities; they know there is something they lack in the world created and controlled by men. None of them has any children, which would allow them to create their own “sphere of influence”, but it is dubious whether such situation would really give any of the women a sense of power. Brewer makes it clear that children, like anything else that a woman could own, belonged legally to the husband (75). All three female narrators in *The Canterbury Tales* are feminists to a certain extent – they make the betterment of women’s situation one of their major concerns. At the same time, though, they comply with the tradition and medieval religious teachings about women, they occupy the roles that are assigned to them, they do not try to form anything new and distinctly feminine. Still, their achievement is in reshaping the traditional attitudes.

Chaucer’s male narrators treat women without the complexity which is allowed to women speaking about their gender. Many of the male narrators, however, focus on issues of love, marriage, and extramarital affairs. This is partly due to Chaucer’s unwillingness to join the host of official courtly poetry which concentrated on battles and feasts, partly because the relationships between men and women form a large part of social life, and thus a large part of any depiction of society. Although the male narratives deal with marital and extramarital relationships, the major focus of the tales is usually not the relationship as such. In the tales told by men, relationships serve to demonstrate more general ideas, attitudes, or preconceptions. Men tell tales of various genres because their social position is not limited to the choice between a family and a cloister. This thesis focuses on four of the noble tales and two fabliau told by the “churls” as these tales demonstrate three major attitudes to women. In these six tales, women are limited to the role of examples, both positive and negative. In the courtly and

religious tales, women are positive, yet passive, impersonators of virtues. The aristocratic narrators focus on the courtly tradition and make women the object of adoration. The courtly ideal is a lady who wields the power over life and death of her lover but who is never, in fact, asked about her opinions. Even in the *Franklin's Tale*, which creates an illusion of equality between the partners at its beginning, the wife is eventually ordered to submit to the husband and she passively does so. Woman is subjected to higher political will, she is always obedient because it is expected of her. There is no complexity as to the woman's inner life in neither the courtly stories, nor the religious ones. The heroines do not struggle, and they do not even have the faintest idea of struggling, against the male authority in any way. The Christian ideal is as passive as the courtly ideal is. The only difference between these ideals is that the Christian ideal woman is subjected to extreme trials. The ideal women do have emotions, that is a dimension the male narrators allow and are capable of realistically depicting. Women may be sorrowful, even broken-hearted, but never doubting or rebellious. The fabliau heroines, on the other hand, do not wish to be manipulated by their old husbands who represent the world of male authority. They are young, animal-like in their search for pleasure, and reluctant to be bound by a man. Yet they seek no higher goal by their revolt, they only comply with the traditional satire of the "old husband-young wife" model. Moreover, these wives are not subject to morality. They do not think about moral issues and indeed, neither does anyone else in the fabliaux. In the end, these women submit to their lovers and express no actual will of their own. Again, they are reduced to the role of examples and lack the complexity of the heroines in the women's tales. The fabliau women may be perceived as negative examples, they support the traditional satire of wives. But although they are not examples to follow, they are not judged. And despite the fact that they are not as obviously passive as the ideal heroines, they are not

active either. They do not choose their lovers, they submit. The male authority asserts itself unconsciously in all the male narrators' tales. Concerning the man-woman relationships, men are satisfied within the boundaries of the current system. They feel no need to reform these relationships or to elaborate on women's feelings.

All in all, Chaucer's attitude to women in *The Canterbury Tales* can hardly be judged as anti-feminist. His portrayals of women are splendid and still attractive centuries after. He does not assert the male dominance in all his tales but he realistically employs different narrators to express different attitudes. Some of the tales question the medieval system of authorities, yet none of them is openly subversive. Chaucer's female narrators cannot be judged by today's standards of feminism and when they are looked at from the medieval point of view, the undertone of feminism in their behaviour and tales emerges. They are concerned with bettering the conditions for women, they challenge the authorities in their tales. And although the women of the male tales are no revolutionaries, they are still humane enough for a modern reader to enjoy. Chaucer does not portray women's struggle for self-assertion, he unfolds the complex web of his society. Chaucer's attitude to women as shown in his works is more complex than that of his contemporaries, and at the same time remains within the borders given by the society. Chaucer is a very careful poet and as such may be found inconvenient by some modern feminists. But others, like Martin, appreciate his capacity to portray plausible medieval "revolutionaries".

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