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**Depiction of Women in Chaucer's *The  
Canterbury Tales* in Comparison  
Across Medieval Genres**

Bachelor's Diploma Thesis

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*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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## **I/ Introduction**

In my thesis I focus on the analysis of presentation of women in various medieval genres and their comparison in Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*, where women appear as both narrators as well as subjects of the narrative.

My aim is to prove that greater attention is paid to the various portrayals of women in *The Canterbury Tales* than in other medieval works and that this portrayal in many cases widely differs from that presented in literature of that time. I also intend to demonstrate that despite the fact that women are in a minority among the Canterbury pilgrims (there are only three women out of a total of twenty nine pilgrims) and therefore it may seem they are underrepresented, they are an irreplaceable part of the work. Not only do they appear as story-tellers, but they also feature as important characters in stories told by both men and women. Chaucer offers us a wide variety of their representation – from the passive, obedient or godly characters through insidious, faithless or hypocritical to the radical ones – which displays the prejudices and expectations connected with the social roles of women in the Middle Ages. Chaucer's manner of their vivid and varied depiction makes these characters unforgettable and, therefore, it is no coincidence that they are at the heart of the most popular stories of *The Canterbury Tales*. In my opinion, it is one of the things that makes Chaucer one of the most outstanding figures of English literature.

In the second chapter I briefly introduce the main literary genres and tendencies in medieval literature. I pay attention to the development of literary

genres appearing in medieval literature and their brief characteristics and themes. I focus in detail on the romances and the works of church representatives because they provide us with two major ways of depicting women in the fourteenth century – a woman as the ideal (courtly or religious) and a woman as the object of antifeminist satire. In the second part of the chapter I focus on the most important social changes of the Chaucer's time and his life and career to illustrate that he was an experienced man who encountered people of many ranks during his career which provided him with material to benefit from when creating *The Canterbury Tales*. Then I pay attention to the main genres that appear in *The Canterbury Tales* and try to prove that Chaucer was very well aware of their conventions as well as of their characteristic themes. I am going to prove that in many cases he deliberately violates them in order to raise a discussion and to propose a new way of portraying and perceiving women in literature.

The third chapter is dedicated to women characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. The first half of the chapter depicts the characters of the two female storytellers – the Wife of Bath and the Prioress – both of whom are unusual and quite controversial characters because their personalities lack attributes expected of their social status and the stories they tell violate the conventions of their genre - romance and miracle story. In the second half of this chapter I pay attention to the most popular tales describing women in men's narrative. I start with religious genres - saint's lives and pious tales - whose heroines seemingly fit the description of the Christian ideal of that time – Cecily from "The Second Nun's Tale", Constance from "The Man of Law's Tale" and Griselda

from "The Clerk's Tale". Afterwards I shortly discuss the courtly ideal which is one of the main and most important components of romance. This ideal is mirrored in the character of Emily from "The Knight's Tale". Then I examine women representatives who are their very opposites – the unfaithful and disrespectful wives which are usually to be found in fabliaux: Alison, the heroine of "The Miller's Tale", May, the heroine of "The Merchant's Tale", miller's wife and daughter in "The Reeve's Tale", and merchant's wife in "The Shipman's Tale". I conclude the chapter with presenting "The Nun's Priest Tale" which represents the fourth main genre presented in *The Canterbury Tales* – a beast tale.

The chapter ends with presentation of a unique story that – besides the story of Alison from "The Wife of Bath's Tale" - attempts to offer a compromise to the contrasting views of women: the story of Dorigen from "The Franklin's Tale".

In the conclusion I summarise my arguments and try to show that Chaucer challenges the black and white depiction of women which makes him is one of the first medieval writers who pays attention to their non-stereotypical portrayal. He works with the most popular genres of his time, and he intentionally breaks their conventions in order to draw our attention to the stories and their protagonists. Nevertheless, he offers a compromise to the two extreme ways of representing women as solely good or solely evil.

## **II/ Literature of the Middle Ages**

The Middle Ages are often referred to as the “dark ages”. However, as Ker puts it, on the other hand the Middle Ages “have been glorified by many writers; ‘the Age of Chivalry’, ‘the Ages of Faith’ have often been contrasted with the hardness of the age of enlightenment, rationalism, and material progress;” (9). As Balwin claims, “the medieval literature of Europe may be very largely comprised in the single word *story*” (3) – typical medieval poetry is narrative, so is prose. Drama was in abeyance. According to Baldwin, there is a difference between the habits of story-telling in the earlier period and in the later: “the general characteristics of earlier medieval literature may be summed up in the word *epic*; the general characteristics of later medieval literature, in the word *romance*, and the imaginary line between them may be drawn about 1100,” (Baldwin 4).

### **II.1/ Literary genres in Medieval Literature**

The Anglo-Saxon invaders created a general organization of many kings coexisting within common culture. Therefore, even in literature the ideal of kingly behaviour was extremely important. The literature of this period is therefore characteristic by the heroic ideal, the heroic epic poem, such is the best known survivor of this period - *Beowulf*. This society was dominated by males: in the surviving records of it women are rarely mentioned – the only exceptions are the daughters or wives of kings. The society soon converted to Christianity which became one of the main topics in literature. Other topics such as romantic love which was the main topic of later literature appears hardly at



all. As Baldwin points out, "the Old English folk that made and sang the *Beowulf* were heathen. They worshipped, not the white Christ, but Thunder (*Thunor*), the mighty god of the hammer," (Baldwin 26). However, we find very few references to this worship in Old English writings. It is because these works were mediated to the audience through Christians. Since the English were converted, monasteries became the centers of all learning and all education where books were transcribed. This put the knowledge in the hands of the church and under Christian interpretation. It is no wonder that most of the books were religious.

Middle English literature introduced the narrative of adventure where the idealized hero of the previous period is replaced by a more realistic protagonist who fights, laughs and falls in and out of love. As pointed out in Abrams, "the perspective now included women, who became, finally, recognized as half of the human race. True, they appear ordinarily as stereotypes, whether in romance and love lyric or in antifeminist satire," (Abrams 7). The conventional character of medieval literature is caused by the attempt of many both religious and secular writers to reflect the unchanging principles of the Christian doctrine and the undesirability of reformation. However, the larger proportion of surviving medieval literature is religious writing of all possible types: sermons, homilies (commentaries following a reading of scripture), saint's lives, miracle stories (dramatizations of some extraordinary power exhibited by a saint, or also a play based upon Bible scenes), pious tales, moral allegories (tales using a metaphor or symbol for the purpose of communicating a hidden meaning), exempla (moralized tales that usually embroider a sermon or homily) and many

more. The commonest secular literary types were, amongst others, fabliaux (short, humorous, and sometimes bawdy stories, intended to be recited by a minstrel), beast tales (short tales whose characters are personified animals), satires (works aiming to expose, and sometimes to correct, personal, social, or spiritual follies or vices), and romances (tales of chivalric adventures).

### **II.1.1/ Romances**

One of the most popular genres in Medieval Literature was romance. According to Baldwin, the three ideal motives of romance are: love, adventure and chivalry. By the first motive, romantic love, "we generally mean passion and idealizing devotion; we mean wooing and worship." (Baldwin 62). The wooing and adoration are a literary code for medieval romance. "Though the homage paid to women was doubtless enhanced through religion by the increasing honor paid to Mary, it was not only reflected, but promoted, by literature," (Baldwin 63). The second motive of romance is adventure. The hero of romance seeks adventure for its own sake. "For this he turns aside at any time; and often his main object, if he have one, is not realm or wife or treasure, but that shadowy or fanciful achievement summed up in the word *quest*. Thus a typical scene of medieval romance presents an exciting situation without much regard to the reality of persons involved or the motives of their actions," (Baldwin 65). The third motive is chivalry. During his adventure, the hero is fighting to win the praise of his lady. "The motive of a romance is not merely love of a woman, but what we still call romantic love or chivalrous devotion to a lady," (Baldwin 68). The hero is usually a knight whose ideal is service to his

lady and whose deeds for her are regulated by courtesy. The scene for presenting the code of courtesy is a tournament or joust.

Short romances are often confused with the fabliau. However, they differ in several attributes - unlike the romance, the characters in fabliaux are not knights and ladies, but tradespeople and students, and in tone the story tends toward farce. Also the description of a single situation "is often carried in the *fabliaux* to the extent of compressing the incidents of the story within twenty-four hours on a single scene and filling this little space with uninterrupted action," (Baldwin 105) which gives us the impression of rapidity. Among the best fabliaux in English literature are Chaucer's Canterbury Tales of the Miller and the Reeve.

Baldwin observes that "even while medieval literature seemed entirely devoted to knights and ladies, to courtly love and chivalrous adventures, there were clever writers and willing readers to turn all this to satire. For satire is always the foe of romance; and satire always opposes to romance the facts of every-day life," (106). However, medieval satire was not aimed so much against romance as against the romantic idealizing of women. Satire claimed that women do not deserve the chivalrous devotion being impulsive, passionate, fickle and so on. Similar arguments were used by some antifeminine authors of religious works.

### **II.1.2/ Christian poetry**

As I mentioned before, with the arrival of Christendom monasteries became literary centers concentrating all the education and learning and

producing books. Therefore, the church was in the position to influence literary production and interpretation. Thus women were depicted according to the views of patriarchal authority. As Martin states, "women in literature have mainly been created by male authors," (Martin xiii). Women were mainly represented in two contrasting views influenced by the archetypal figures of the Virgin Mary and Eve. Mary – the ideal woman, the immaculate mother of Jesus Christ who possesses every positive quality that a woman could possess versus Eve – the woman who corrupted her partner and had them (and all the mankind) expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The Middle Ages inherited certain opinions of women emphasizing their weakness, instability, and changeability from the cultural authorities of antique poetry. These opinions can be found in the work of Virgil, who claims that a "woman is always volatile and changeable" (*varium et mutabile semper, femina*)" (Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* 126), as well as in the work of Ovid, according to whose statement "girls' promises are lighter than falling leaves" (*verba puellarum, foliis leviora caducis*)" (Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* 126), or later in the Bishop Hildebert of Lavardin's claim that "woman is a fragile thing, never constant except in crime" (Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* 126). One of the main arguments for justification of women's subordination in marriage was by no means Aristotle's claim that "the male provides the 'form' and the 'principle of the movement', the female provides the body, in other words, the material." (Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended, An Anthology of Medieval*

*Texts* 40). The monastic culture adopted many of these ideas which dictated subservient position of a woman to her husband.

Women's portrayal in literature to certain extent reflects the state in medieval society. A woman's position in the Middle Ages was subordinate. As Hibbert points out, "the married woman was not considered to stand on the same level as her husband; and it cannot be doubted that many wives were beaten as often as their children," (107). However, he also asserts that although a woman did not possess almost any control over her goods, "she was not left defenceless at the man's mercy. The Church recognized separation in cases of gross cruelty, fornication and apostasy; while the law accepted a woman's right to hold land, to make a will or a contract, to sue and to appear as her own or her husband's attorney, and, if widowed, to be the guardian of her children," (107).

## **II.2. Social situation of Chaucer's Time**

*The Canterbury Tales* are a remarkable literary work mainly because of its wide range of depictions of characters and occupations that include all the layers of the fourteenth-century society. Chaucer describes each of its representatives – men and women, rich and poor, sacred and secular, noble and common, etc., in their interactions focusing on their characters and relationships.

The fourteenth century was a time of the decline of feudalism. It was connected with significant social changes:

the expansion of trade brought much prosperity to certain sections of English society and lifted a new group, the middle class, to a position of affluence and prestige between the hereditary nobility and the lower

commons. The merchants gave financial and political support to the King, but used it to strengthen their new advantages at the expense of nobility and royalty alike, (Schlauch 204).

Although this may have given an impression of prosperity, a feeling of insecurity was widespread. More and more taxes were demanded for war expenditures, which presented an excessive burden for the poorest layers of the society. In addition, between the years 1340 and 1380 England was devastated by several waves of the Great Plague which reduced the English population by one third in the middle of the century. For lack of labour force labourers had, at least for short periods, an opportunity to improve their status and conditions. However, when the crisis passed, most of those people were thrust back into their old positions. When the Parliament of 1380 imposed a Poll Tax, it provoked a movement of social revolution, the Rising of 1381, which attempted to terminate the feudal system throughout England. The Rising gained wide support through all the social classes which was indicator of the need for radical social changes.

Chaucer lived in the second half of the 14th century (1340–1400) and during his lifetime he managed to combine two careers: an artist and a state clerk. He came from the type of recently enriched middle-class mercantile family: his father was a wine merchant, engaged in a trade which contributed to the economy of the country at that time. Chaucer's family even had access to the court: his father had him received in the household of Duchess Elizabeth of Ulster, wife of one of the sons of Edward III. After serving briefly in the French war, Chaucer held secretarial position at the royal court, receiving annuity from the King. He married Philippa Roet, sister of Katherine Swynford who became

the wife of John of Gaunt. In the 1370s Chaucer was sent abroad on important missions regarding England's foreign policy. During these missions he visited Flanders, France, and especially Italy, which was at this time centre of wealth, splendour and artistic activity. In 1385-86 he was a justice of the peace for Kent and in 1386 he represented that county in Parliament as knight of the shire. In 1386 Chaucer lost or resigned his customs employment, but in 1389 he received from Richard II the lucrative post of clerk of the works for all the royal residences. Later he resigned and until his death he lived upon a modest royal pension and from occasional gifts that must have come to him as a very successful poet. During his lifetime he collected rich experience, because thanks to his office engagements he had many opportunities to encounter many ranks of society, both at home and abroad. As a politician, civil servant and diplomat, he was immersed in the turbulent developments in the society of his time. His ability to capture the intricate truths of human nature and the individual types themselves of against the group surrounding them enabled him to utilise these experiences for literary purposes.

### **II.3 / Literary genres in *The Canterbury Tales***

*The Canterbury Tales* are one of the highest points of medieval literature. Although it is a fragment, it shows the wide variety of genres that Chaucer used for distinction and characterization of the pilgrims aiming to Canterbury. He used inherited plots and forms to create his masterpiece. As an educated man and a poet he was without any doubt well aware of the existing literary forms and their conventions. The first story of *the Canterbury Tales* is "The Knight's Tale" which is a romance based on a classical theme. Another

romance – this time with Arthurian theme - is the tale narrated by the Wife of Bath. "The Clerk's Tale" of Griselda offers us another type of depicting a romance. A romance told by the Franklin offers a balance between two extreme views on marriage as presented in "The Clerk's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale". Despite all these tales having features of romances, the stories themselves, their tone and interpretation widely differ from each other.

The next genre often occurring in *The Canterbury Tales* is the saints' lives and pious tales. Hagiography was a very popular domain of medieval literature. It is represented here by the tale told by the Second Nun describing the life of St. Cecilia. The tale of Prioress is a miracle story connected with the cult of the Virgin. Although these women, both the Second Nun and the Prioress, are members of the same order and they both tell a story of a religious theme, their characters and stories are in a direct opposition: while the Second Nun probably is a pious woman telling a devout tale, the Prioress is shallow, a counterfeit woman whose story is full of religious intolerance as I examine in the following chapter. "The Man of Law's Tale" depicts the life of Constance, a Christian princess, although to a certain extent it follows the pattern of romances.

The third major type appearing in *The Canterbury Tales* is the fabliau. It is mainly represented by "The Reeve's Tale", "The Miller's Tale", "The Shipman's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale". The women characters of these stories will be discussed in the next chapter.

The fourth genre in *The Canterbury Tales* is the beast tale most famous of which is "The Nun's Priest Tale".



### **III/ Women in *The Canterbury Tales***

Chaucer in his masterpiece depicting a group of people participating in the pilgrimage to Thomas Beckett's shrine in Canterbury portrays twenty nine pilgrims of various age, sex, and social status. It enables him to portray all the layers of English society. We find two basic approaches towards women's depiction in *The Canterbury Tales*: there are women featuring as storytellers telling their stories to other pilgrims, and women appearing as title or side characters in stories told either by women or men. Their portrayals widely differ depending on their social position, faith, marital status or position in the narrative. As Martin points out, it is evident that "women and the relationships between the sexes are Chaucer's favourite subject," (Martin xii). He presents men and women in all the possible interactions, social processes and relationships which he sees as a problem area. It is interesting that in his writing of these relationships, such as struggle for power, love affairs, unrequited love and marriages Chaucer "shows an unwillingness or inability to write of happy weddings," (Martin xii).

Chaucer seems far from being approving of the opinion that a matrimony can be a happy union if the woman accepts her secondary role in marriage. He works with genres typical of his time, nevertheless, by emphasising some features and applying some unusual views he subverts their anticipated effect.

#### **III.1/ Women as Narrators**

*The Canterbury Tales* contain three stories told by women – "The Wife of Bath's Tale", "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Second Nun's Tale". All three tell a

story, that reveal or complement their characters introduced in the *General Prologue* - except for the Second Nun whose portrait is not there. They present the only two major roles available to women in the fourteenth century – the nun and the married woman. As Priscilla Martin notes, the men “are defined in terms of a large number of professions,” (30) whereas the women are only described in relation to men. The nun and the wife stand for the archetypal figures of Mary and Eve. They are as different as possible. “But the differences are not between poverty, chastity and obedience in the nun and contented marital love, family life and motherhood in the wife. We do not see the nun in private prayer or the wife caring for a husband and children,” (Martin 31). In fact, neither woman is a mother. At first sight they choose expected genres for their stories: the Wife chooses a secular Arthurian romance dealing with relationship between men and women and Prioress chooses a miracle story praising the Virgin. However, their stories will be in following lines proven to be quite different from the conventional themes we would anticipate.

### **III.1.1/ The Wife of Bath**

Chaucer's Wife of Bath is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and outstanding characters in medieval literature. Although she is one out of only three women at the pilgrimage, she became one of the most important narrators of the whole book. She represents a threat to the male world – she is self-confident, wealthy, independent and her unconventional speech and opinions instigate a response among other pilgrims – especially the clerics in her audience. She puts herself into an open discourse with them reminding

them of the double standards for women and men which dictate an extremely subordinate position for women. Her self-confidence may lie in fact that she is a member of the new influential social group – the middle class.

Wife of Bath presents a perspective that challenges the male authority and asserts her own proposition about the roles of women. She is very well aware of the antifeminine tradition introduced by men. Her last husband Jankin, a clerk, used to read to her about it from his book of wicked women.

The Wife is able to think independently and defend herself – when she mentions that, according to some teachings, “it is wrong to marry more than once,” (Chaucer 259), she does not hesitate and brings out the examples of King Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob who all had several wives. As Joyner sums up, she “uses Biblical passages to support her primary argument that successive marriages are permissible” (Joyner). She interprets the Bible herself and therefore “she takes on a role usually reserved for clerical figures and in turn adopts their interpretive techniques” (Joyner). She even challenges males in her audience to prove her wrong:

Show me a time or text where God disprages  
Or sets a prohibition upon marriages  
Expressly, let me have it! Show it to me!  
And where did He command virginity? (Chaucer 260)

Saying this she challenges not only antifeminism, but also clericalism because it was mainly clerks who were in position of interpreting books.

As Martin points out “medieval society was considered by some political theorist to consist of three estates – those who work, those who fight and those who pray – and women were sometimes lumped together as a fourth estate,” (31). In my view, Wife figuratively possess features of the first three

estates too – she works (she is a clothmaker), she knows the Christian teachings and she does not hesitate to fight against the dogmas created by those who pray.

Her tale has two parts: the *Prologue* where she examines the clerical authority to defend her opinions and views and the tale itself which complements it. "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is a miniature Arthurian romance. It is supposed to be a story of heroic adventure often encompassing courtly love, whose hero is usually a heroic knight following chivalry's strict codes and defeating monsters or opponents in order to win favour of the lady. Some of these conventional features are present in this tale: its unnamed hero is on a quest in order to complete his task - to answer the question what it is that women most desire – or lose his life. However, hero of this tale is not a chivalrous, heroic knight who fight to win favour of a beautiful woman: although he is an Arthurian knight, he committed violent crime on a woman and he is only offered a chance to save his life by the clemency of the queen who rather than death sentence proposes re-education. The knight was given various replies during completing of his task to find out what women desire the most:

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 cosseted and flattered. (Chaucer 283)  
All these replies represent the main charges made against women by satirists.

In order to complete his task, the knight has to give up all his prejudices and patriarchal claims.

In addition, he does not win the lady of his heart by sword: he is forced to marry an old hag that helped him win his life. We do not find romantic love or devotion to the lady in this story.

Moreover, the story does not end with the conventional happy ending especially typical for romance: a wedding. The knight is rewarded with a beautiful and loyal wife (with which he then lives happily ever after) only after he gives up his dominance over her and lets her decide:

The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan  
At last he said, with all the care in life,  
‘My lady and my love, my dearest wife,  
I leave the matter to your wise decision.  
You make the choice yourself, for the provision  
Of what may be agreeable and rich  
In honour to us both, I don’t care which;  
Whatever pleases you suffices me’ (Chaucer 291)

This story thus presents a parallel to “The Wife of Bath’s *Prologue*” - they both include the same instructions: in order to achieve a happy marriage men have to give up their sovereignty in wedlock. It also shows that “showing that submission to the desires and needs of women does not result in the male being dominated,” (Blake).

### **III.1.2/ The Prioress**

The character of the Prioress is a woman full of contradictions. In the *Prologue* she is presented as an elegant, venerable, pious woman of distinguished behaviour and full of compassion. However, as Victoria Wickham is convinced, “it is what her tale says about her, however, that is at the core of Chaucer’s intent in her depiction: she is shallow, unworldly, un-Christian, and

childish of character, and this is what Chaucer wants the reader to understand about her" (Wickham).

Although the Prioress is nun, the pilgrims find her attractive as a woman.

Her outfit suggests to follow the most fashionable trends:

Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.  
She wore a coral trinket on her arm,  
A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,  
Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen (Chaucer 7)

Her looks are described in the vocabulary used in romantic poetry : "Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-grey; / Her mouth was very small, but soft and red, / Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread," (Chaucer 7). Instead of giving herself a saint's name as a sign of renouncing her old identity, she is called 'Madame Eglantyne'. These details are common in medieval satire against nuns. Chaucer lets her tell a relatively harmless religious story to demonstrate more attributes of her character.

The Prioress' tale shows many features of a miracle story – dramatized form of a story in which a saint is engaged in performing a miracle to expose his or her power. Her tale begins with an invocation to the Virgin Mary – which was common theme in medieval literature - and continues with a story of a little boy, son of a widow and a worshipper of Virgin, who is killed by Jews. His body is found by his mother from which moment he starts to sing although his throat was cut and keeps singing for several days. His murderers are executed.

The Prioress is introduced as a tolerant and sensitive woman who is proper representative of her order as well as of clergy itself and as a pure follower to the qualities of the Virgin Mary:

And to seem dignified in all her dealings.

As for her sympathies and tender feelings,  
She was so charitably solicitous  
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse  
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.  
And she had little dogs she would be feeding  
With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.  
And bitterly she wept if one were dead  
Or someone took a stick and made it smart;  
She was all sentiment and tender heart. (Chaucer 7)

However, through her tale and looks she is proven to be a hypocrite and she disturbs the depiction of herself as Virgin Mary's follower. In her tale she expresses strong anti-Semitic attitudes through which she is seen as vindictive, childish, and immature woman. Her story should not depict religious intolerance because her ideal "Mary is the embodiment of love and mercy" (Wickham). Also, her story is much more violent and bloody than any other story told by the pilgrims. "The gentle Prioress tells the only story that could seriously corrupt anybody." (Martin 36).

She is capable of emotions, however, she expresses them when grieving for her dogs instead of grieving over the passion of Christ. The explanation may be that her dogs are surrogates for the children she cannot have. As Wickham claims, "while as a woman it seems natural for Eglyntyne to have feelings for mothering instinct, as a nun she should have made a much greater effort to suppress those urges; her feelings should be focused entirely on Jesus and Mary, and she should be content with her choice of vocation," (Wickham). As Martin adds, "The Prioress's Tale" is the only Canterbury Tale whose central character is a child," (Martin 34).

In my opinion, Chaucer rather chose to hide his criticism and the hypocrisy of the church into the seemingly innocent description of this pilgrim in the *General Prologue* and in her seemingly innocuous religious tale because he

wanted to avoid direct conflict with the church representatives because church had still very powerful position in his time.

As we can see, neither Wife, nor Prioress cannot fulfil her social role: Wife is not calm and obedient wife and Prioress is not humble and tolerant nun. On the other hand, neither of them is depicted as completely evil. Wife is described as capable of love (she admits that she married her last husband for love and not for wealth) and forgiveness. Prioress is depicted as a woman longing for children who is forced to deny her womanhood.

The third female story-teller is the Second Nun. The only mention of her in the *General Prologue* is: "Another Nun, the secretary at her cell, / Was riding with her, and three Priests as well," (Chaucer 7). It does not indicate anything of her character which cannot be therefore compared with the story she tells. Her story is a saint's life whose heroine is an example of religious ideal. The tale is therefore discussed in the following sub-chapter.

### **III.2/ Women as Subjects of the Stories**

As I mentioned before, overwhelming majority of the pilgrims aiming to the Canterbury to visit Thomas Becket's shrine are men. Although heroes of these stories are mostly men, women are essential part of almost every of these stories. Male story-tellers are influenced by the fourteenth-century view on women. It corresponds with their choice of genres reflecting those views: stories depicting noble, chaste, humble, modest, pious, patient women who follow the role model of the Virgin Mary are usually in form of romances, saints'



lives, pious tales, miracle stories and other genres where women are praised for their qualities and worshipped.

On the other hand, the portrayal of unfaithful, bossy, nagging, vain and false-hearted women mainly appear in fabliau and beast tales.

### **III.2.1/ The Ideal vs. The Satire**

As mentioned above, one of the roles in which women were presented was the Christian ideal of the Virgin Mary. We find this description mostly in genres with religious content – saints lives, pious tales etc. - and romances.

Women in these stories possess only positive qualities and often intrust their fate into the hands of God or their husband.

Three stories of the *Canterbury Tales* present adult women of Christian virtues as the main characters . These are "The Man of Law's Tale", "The Clerk's Tale" and "The Second Nun's Tale". Heroines of those stories – Constance, Cecilia, and Griselda – have qualities such as: chastity, patience, constancy, faith, self-sacrifice and many more.

Although all three women are married, it does not prevent them from being seen as pious: as Martin puts it "sexuality is presented in service of marriage and marriage in the service of Christian life," (Martin 132). Constance, heroine of "The Man of Law's Tale", undergoes many adventures and trials to reunite with her husband: Constance, a Christian princess, is betrothed to the Syrian Sultan under the condition that he convert to Christianity. The Sultanness, his mother, tries to prevent it and has Constance set adrift on the sea. Constance is shipwrecked on the coast of Northumberland, a pagan country,

where she eventually meets King Alla and marries him. Alla converts to Christianity but soon is forced to leave. Constance gives birth to a healthy son, but her mother-in-law falsifies a letter that Alla sent to his wife and expels Constance back to the sea even with her baby-son. After many trials Constance and her son get to Rome where they are found by Alla.

During her journey she submits herself to the will of God and withstand every tragedy with calm and peace. "Constance harmoniously unites the roles of Christian, daughter, wife, mother, subject, victim," (Martin 134) by which she resembles the Madonna in contrast to her Eve-like mothers-in-law. Even though Constance throughout the story suffered so much, she remains very passive and constant. Despite the fact she is heroine of the story, she is always the object – she does not protest against anything: she accepts being sent without regard to why, to who and where she is sent. She is intended as an example to all Christians. However, despite its many dramas, the story is anti-dramatic, and Constance is too passive and resigned. Looking at it from different angle, her story describes a woman's trials: an arranged marriage, sexual assault, rivalry with mother-in-law and many more which she deals with quiet acceptance and submission.

Another tale of a woman constant in adversity is Griselda, heroine of "The Clerk's Tale". While Constance's trials were imposed on her by the destiny, trials of Griselda are inflicted on her by her husband. She is as mild, patient, and humble as Constance. Her story is, however much more oppressive and intense. There are bigger differences between poor Griselde and rich marquis Walter. The story is unusual kind of romance: "the action moves from the court

to the country, from the palace of Walter to the cottage of Janicula, the poorest man in an impoverished village,” (Martin 143). Griselde has to promise to her husband not only total submission and obedience, but she also has to promise to always want only what he wants. Her submission, patience, and obedience are so extreme that even Clerk warns wives against trying to imitate it.

“The Second Nun’s Tale” is saint’s life. At first sight it is a religious story of life of St. Cecilia who converted many people to Christianity before she died as a martyr. At second sight the story examines the marital status. Although Cecilia is good and sincere wife, she becomes the leading force in her marriage. She sets her rules about how her husband Valerian must treat her:

And she began to speak. ‘I have’ said she,  
‘A guardian angel, one that wheteher awake or sleeping  
My body is committed to his keeping.  
‘Were he to feel – and O, believe it true-  
That you had touched me either in love or lust  
He instantly would bring your death on you;  
Young as you are you would go down to dust.  
But if you love me cleanly, as you must,  
He will love you, even as he loves me,  
And show the glory of his ectassy” (Chaucer 438).

Valerian, has to follow because of the threat of her guardian angel. Cecilia even makes him convert to Christianity and get baptized. Although she is a representative of religious ideal, she achieved a certain level of power in her marriage.

All three stories are set in the past, which may suggests that we cannot find women as virtuous as these anymore. It supports the argument of their unattainability and suggests the fact that society is changing and not only allows, but also demands women that are little more lively, active and decisive.

Last story that describes virtuous lady is "The Knight's Tale". It is a romance introducing many typical aspects of knighthood such as motive of courtly love, tournament, noble knights, the lady of their heart and many more. Two cousins, Arcite and Palamon are captured and imprisoned by Theseus, ruler of Athens. From their cell in the tower they can see into the palace garden where they sight Emily, sister of Theseus' wife, and immediately fall in love with her. Although they were like brothers, they now become implacable rivals in love.

Chaucer brings the motive of love at first sight to extreme: Arcite and Palamon long for Emily many years without any hope for reciprocation breaking their previous stable and long-lasting loyalty to each other. Whilst she does not know anything about their feelings.

Arcite is released from prison earlier and in disguise he enters Emily's household as servant. Palamon manages to escape from prison and on his way out he encounters Arcite. Arrival of Theseus interrupts their fight in the middle. Theseus orders them to compete in a tournament, the winner of which is free to marry Emily. One year later, when the tournament approaches, we see Arcite, Palamon and Emily as they successively visit temple where they pray for what they want more: Palamon prays to Venus, the goddess of love, to "fully have possession of Emily" (Chaucer 63), Arcite prays to Mars, the god of war, and asks him: "grant victory tomorrow to my sword!" (Chaucer 67). Each of them promises to his god to be his servant till the rest of his life while in romance it is usually the lady to whom the knight should promise his service.

However it is Emily who expresses the most peculiar wish. She prays to Diana, goddess of the moon, the hunt, and chastity:

Such as upon Actaeon once was spent,  
Thou knowest well, O chaste omnipotent,  
That I would be a virgin all my life  
And would be neither mistress, no, nor wife.  
I am, thou knowest, of thy company,  
A huntress, still in my virginity,  
And only ask to walk the woodlands wild,  
And not to be a wife or be with child,  
Nor would I know the company of man. (Chaucer 65).

As if she knew this is not possible, she states another wish:

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. (Chaucer 65)

As Martin highlights, "it is the first and only time that we hear her speak in the poem," (48) and her speech is unexpected as much as the content of it. Martin also claims that "Emily is the only woman in English literature until the twentieth century to express the desire not to have children, though it seems a reasonable enough choice at a time when childbearing was so dangerous," (Martin 50). Despite her vivid speech she is presented as excessively passive and dull.

Emily is only matter of business in the story. She is the cause and object of the combat and, at the same time, she is the main price. Although she is part of the main action of the story, she remains passive. There is no response expected from her because she does not even get to know about the Palamon and Arcite's admiration of her till the tournament is announced. She is not even consulted if she wants to get married and who she wants to marry. Everything is decided by her brother-in-law, Theseus, however, Emily never protests

against it. In my opinion she knows that even if she does, it will be of little or none influence.

In the end, the wishes of Arcite and Palamon come true: Arcite wins the tournament and therefore wins Emily to become his wife. However he dies very shortly after because of his riding accident. After several years Theseus decides to marry Emily to Palamon in order to form alliance. Thus it seems that Palamon's wish to marry Emily and Emily's wish to marry the man who loves her most come true as well. Last verses of the tale suggest happy ending:

Now Palamon's in joy, amid a wealth  
Of bliss and splendour, happiness and wealth.  
He's tenderly beloved of Emily  
And serves her with a gentle constancy,  
And never jealous word between them spoken  
Or other sorrow in a love unbroken. (Chaucer 86)

The last strophe confirms the statement that Emily is an ideal of courtly lady, but in expression of her desire never to get married or have children Chaucer manages to raise serious doubts that Emily tries to fit her social role by posing as submissive woman who acts according to the orders and wishes of the others. It also implies the topic discussed in "The Wife of Bath's Tale": what do women want. In this tale, what Emily wants is not investigated at all.

As a contrast, unfaithful and disrespectful wives are the commonest to be found in fabliaux: a comic, sometimes bawdy tale with a plot that usually involves a cuckolded husband, realistically motivated tricks and ruses. Characters include peasants, tradesmen, restless young wives, greedy clergy, and young scholars. Fabliau presents a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. The most interesting of them are Alison, the heroine of "The Miller's Tale", and May, the heroine of "The Merchant's Tale". These

stories are perfect examples of fabliau - they both include young beautiful women married to much older man and despite his jealousy they find themselves a young lover. They deceive their husband and have to retrieve the situation which leads to a comic situation at the end of the story.

Alison, the heroine of "The Miller's Tale", is an eighteen-year old woman married to an old carpenter. She agrees to start an affair with their lodger, Nicholas, who elaborates a scheme that is supposed to convince her husband that a flood is approaching. They hope that putting together the tubs would exhaust him so they will not be disturbed. When they lie together they are disturbed by Absalon, the parish clerk, who is in love with Alison and demands a kiss. She performs a prank on him which leads him to desire for revenge – he comes back and burns Nicholas' backside which awakes sleeping carpenter who thinks that flood has just arrived which causes him to fall down the floor and break his arm. Alison, as the only one, remains unpunished and unharmed.

May, the heroine of "The Merchant's Tale" is in similar situation – she married more than sixty-year old man, January, who is very jealous of her. One of his squires, Damian, falls in love with May, and they agree on meeting in one of the trees in January's garden. January, who meanwhile went blind, regain his sight right to see her with Damian in the middle of committing adultery. However, May succeeds in convincing him that she did it to bring his sight back and makes him apologise to her.

Neither Alison, nor May does not have to face any consequences of their actions.

Although these wives are unfaithful to their husbands without any sign of regret or shame, we do not see them as completely negative characters. On the contrary, they are depicted with a remarkable amount of understanding and appreciated for their wits. Despite the uneasy situation they have to face – being trapped in loveless marriage with much older man and with very limited personal freedom – they manage to do exactly as they please, at least in love matters, and fulfil their need for love by finding themselves a lover.

There are also few examples where women are ridiculed and taken advantage of: "The Shipman's Tale" and "The Miller's Tale". The former is a humorous tale of a merchant's wife who borrows money from her husband's close friend, a young monk, in exchange for sex: "This lovely woman readily agreed / To take his hundred francs and to requite / Sir John by lying in his arms all night," (Chaucer 165). She does not know that he borrowed the money from her husband and when she is asked by her husband to give him the money the monk supposedly returned to her, she realizes that she has been tricked. Although she must feel humiliated and ridiculed, she maintains to keep her face and she offers her husband to repay her debt in bed: "My jolly body's pledged to you instead; / By God I'll never pay except in bed," (Chaucer 168).

"The Reeve's Tale" is a story where both women, mother and daughter are portrayed as negative: they betray the miller and became a part of the revenge of the two student from which miller stole wheat they brought to him for grinding. The Miller's wife is described as proud and superior, however she commits adultery inadvertently. Her daughter, on the other hand, betrays her



father very quickly. Unlike Alison and May we do not feel sympathy with those two women.

Another very popular genre was beast fable - usually a short story with personified animals in which human behaviour is subject to close examination. The most famous of them is the beast fable of cock, Chaunticleer, from "The Nun's Priest Tale". In Chaunticleer's talk to his favourite of his hen wives he sums up the most radical medieval views on women in one quote '*Mulier est hominus confusio*' (Chaucer 223) which means 'Woman is man's ruin' and mistranslates it as the opposite: "(A Latin tag, dear Madam, meaning this: / 'Woman is man's delight and all his bliss')" (Chaucer 223). It demonstrates Martin's claim that "Chaunticleer embodies in parodic form masculine pretensions to learning;" (Martin xiv). The mistranslation may indicate either Chaunticleer's fear of Pertelote, his favourite hen, or criticism and mockery of the masculine interpretations of books and teachings demonstrating their greater knowledge of it. More interesting is Martin's explanation that

Latin was, for western Christendom, the language of the Bible, the Church, the law, the educated. *Mulier est hominis confusio* stems from a Latin, biblical, official, clerical, learned, masculine, misogynistic tradition. Chaunticleer's mistranslation into English alludes to the unofficial courtly tradition, to – if you will – the counter-culture, in which love between the sexes is the source of the deepest human happiness and in which women are revered rather than reviled. (Martin 3-4)

Her argument is supported by Chaunticleer's courtly behaviour towards Pertelote – for example by calling her 'madam':

Dear Madam, as I hope for Heaven's bliss,  
Of one thing God has sent me plenteous grace,  
For when I see the beauty of your face,  
That scarlet loveliness about your eyes,  
All thought of terror and confusion dies. (CT 223)

This wooing is directly followed by the mistranslated quote which Chaucer uses to make a mock of the background of the supposed resemblance of the hen and cock with humans because if they are like us, we look very foolish.

Pertelote is depicted as stereotype of scolded, seductive and bossy woman who dominates over her henpecked husband. More interesting is that she managed to win her dominant position despite the fact that she is only one of Chauntecleer's many wives. In addition, she is treated with respect and admiration.

### **III.2.2 The compromise**

Apart from "The Wife of Bath's Tale" where battle between sexes was settled, we can find another example of balanced and equal marriage in The Canterbury Tales. Unlike other marriages in *The Canterbury Tales*, the marriage in "The Franklin's Tale" can serve as shining example of a relationship between husband and wife.

Wife of Bath remains to be the only narrator who accomplished to achieve happiness in her matrimony. However, she did not succeed until her fifth marriage and after violent fight with her husband. In my view it can be interpreted as a Chaucer's attempt to depict the changing structures of society. Franklin in his romance portrays at first sight ordinary marital couple: lady Dorigen took Arveragus, a noble knight, "for her husband and her lord / – The lordship husbands have upon their wives," (Chaucer 409) and promises him to be true and humble wife. Unlike other knights in the romances, Arveragus readily relinquishes his patriarchal dominance over her:

He freely gave his promise as a knight  
That he would never darken her delight  
By exercising his authority  
Against her will or showing jealousy,  
But obey in all with simple trust  
As any lover of a lady must; (Chaucer 409)

Moreover he fulfils these words when he orders Dorigen to keep her word she gave to Aurelius and he keeps treating her with respect and understanding according to the norms of courtly tradition.

This is the only one marriage that has been happy since the beginning. Author offers us clear directions how to achieve this balance between the two extremes of domination in marriage: by mutual understanding, respect, solidarity, tolerance and equality. Unfortunately, as other tales indicate, this ideal is not going to be achieved soon.

#### **IV/ Conclusion**

At the time when Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, social structure of the world was changing rapidly. The middle class achieved affluence and influence and participated in a development of events of great importance.

The literature of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was rich in genres. There were very popular genres focused on ordinary people, just for amusement or guidance, as well as range of works dedicated to religious topics or used for the purposed of sermons. Most popular of the secular genres was romance which existed in several types or versions, mostly adapted from previous times or foreign patterns.

Geoffrey Chaucer acquainted the changing social turmoil thanks to his post as an state officer and diplomat, which enabled him to get familiar with both people of various ranks and artistic tendencies on progress in the end of the fourteenth century at home as well as abroad. As a skilfull artist he used those experience to portray the peoples characters in the most famous work of his, *The Canterbury Tales*, using wide variety of genres to underline his views of the contemporary world, especially women's place in it. Unlike other works of his time, not only he pays attention to women, and their social roles from the conventional point of view, but also concerns himself with their subordinative positions and their desires. Although he seems to be supporter of conservative order, he appears not to agree with the way women were treated or depicted in literature. He thus depicts women in their stereotypes which he then collapses by showing conventions brought to extreme. It is much more effective approach because the anticipated motives are violated and the expected effect

does not appear. These stories thus express gentle satire that is visible to an attentive reader, because Chaucer probably knew that gentle hint can get him further than open rebellion against the established order.

I describe women in *The Canterbury Tales* in those genres which were common in Chaucer's time and prove that Chaucer not only introduces the opposite ways in which women were depicted, but also gives an example of the happy medium showing that it can be reached.

In my opinion the ability to depict all the diversity among social classes, genres and individuals themselves makes Chaucer the greatest poet of the middle ages. At the same time it makes his characters unforgettable.

The position of women in *The Canterbury Tales* itself or in other medieval genres is a very attractive topic which is still underrepresented and has not been paid sufficient attention. This interesting topic has not been researched properly, and it certainly would deserve bigger and closer attention.

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## Summary

In my thesis I examine depiction of women in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* across the many genres Chaucer worked with. I start with the presentation of the main literary genres occurring in medieval literature which also are to be found in *The Canterbury Tales*. I pay closer attention to the two most important genres of medieval literature – romances and the church poetry – because they present an opposite views – sacred and secular.

In description of modest, pious, constant, and patient women presenting the Christian ideal of Virgin Mary or the romantic ideal of courtly lady Chaucer uses the form of romances, saints' lives, pious tales, miracle stories or romances in which women are adored and praised for their qualities. However, he disturbs these stereotypes by bringing these ideal characters to extreme which causes them to look like parody of themselves.

The portrayal of unfaithful, bossy, nagging, vain and false-hearted women mainly appear in fabliau and beast tales. Also here Chaucer manages to avoid the conventional approach of criticising them which is often to be found in stories like these. Despite their misbehaviour and poor moral qualities, Chaucer shows understanding for these women by describing their uneasy marital situations.

I conclude my work by giving an example of ideal marriage relationship which Chaucer presents in "The Franklin's Tale".

My aim is to prove that Chaucer deliberately chose genres as well as characters so different that it allowed him to depict the society and its problems in whole their diversity without being limited by the black and white contrasts.



## Shrnutí

Ve své práci se zabývám zobrazením žen v Chaucerových *Canterburských povídkách* v žánrech, se kterými Chaucer pracoval. Začínám prezentací hlavních literárních žánrů, kterých se používalo ve středověké literatuře a které také můžeme najít v *Canterburských povídkách*. Bližší pozornost věnuji dvěma nejdůležitějším žánrům středověké literatury – romancím a církevní poezii – protože představují dva opačné pohledy – církevní a světský.

Při popisu skromných, zbožných, věrných a trpělivých žen představujících křesťanský ideál Panny Marie, nebo romantický ideál kurtoazní dámy Chaucer používá forem životů svatých, zbožných příběhů, zázračných příběhů, nebo romancí, ve kterých jsou ženy zbožňované a obdivované pro jejich kvality. Nicméně Chaucer narušuje tyto stereotypy tím, že tyto postavy ideálních žen přivádí do extrému, což způsobuje, že vypadají jako parodie sebe samých.

Zobrazení nevěrných, panovačných, komandujících, marnivých a zrádných žen se převážně objevují ve fabliau a bajkách. Také zde se Chaucer zdárně vyhýbá konvenčnímu přístupu kritizování těchto postav, což je v těchto příbězích častý jev. Navzdory jejich špatnému chování a slabým morálním kvalitám Chaucer ukazuje značnou míru pochopení pro tyto ženy vylíčením jejich nelehké manželské situace.

Práci zakončuji uvedením příkladu ideálního manželského vztahu, který Chaucer popisuje v Povídce statkářově.

Mým cílem je dokázat, že Chaucer si vědomě vybral žánry i charaktery tak rozdílné, že mu to umožnilo zobrazit společnost a její problémy v celé její šíři, aniž by byl omezený zobrazením černobílých kontrastů.