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Marriage and Adultery in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* from the Gender Point of View
Bachelor Thesis

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Declaration

Hereby I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently and that I have used only the sources listed in the Bibliography.
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Mgr. Jaroslav Izavčuk and express my gratitude for his patience and supervision of my thesis.
Annotation

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to explain and describe the gender point of view on marriage and adultery in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. A brief description of the gender theory and the era of the Medieval England in which *The Canterbury Tales* takes place are followed by a detailed analysis of selected *Tales* and by the survey that attempts to conclude the research.

Key Words

Adultery, Canterbury Tales, Gender, Geoffrey Chaucer, Marriage, Infidelity

Anotace

Záměrem této bakalářské práce je vysvětlit a popsat manželství a nevěru v *Canterburských povídkách* z genderového hlediska. Krátký popis genderové teorie a Středověké Anglie, ve které se odehrává děj *Canterburských povídek*, je následován detailní analýzou vybraných povídek a závěrem, který shrnuje zjištěná data.

Klíčová slova

Canterburské povídky, Gender, Geoffrey Chaucer, Manželství, Nevěra
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1 Introduction

Whether a person is a male or female we can easily distinguish, what is difficult to judge is whether he/she also behaves accordingly to his/her ‘gender (or social) role’. Gender studies help us to understand these concepts and give us a theoretical background on which we can examine historical events and literary works, *The Canterbury Tales* in particular. This thesis provides us with information about the gender studies, its development and changes in the view of social status of women. It might seem that the gender studies discuss only the female perspective; it is not so, although we admit that the majority of works dealing with this problematic is concerned on women whose social statuses has undergone major changes and developed the most, while the social status of men remained more or less the same.

To acquire sufficient understanding of the gender roles in *The Canterbury Tales*, it is essential not only to study the gender, but also to be familiar with the historical background of the Medieval Age in Great Britain and its significant events that has slowly changed the perception of women in the society. Among those events are wars, which were expensive and led to tax increase; the Black Death, which indirectly caused the declination in feudal system; and the establishment of new cities and towns which attracted people because of the opportunities they offered.

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to conclude both the gender and historical point of view, so that we achieve the right level of knowledge to be able to assess the marriage and adultery from the gender perspective, it will also demonstrate the marriage and infidelity as it was presented in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and it will compare the potential differences in the concepts of marriage that might appear.

The bachelor thesis is based on the findings from the research of the literary and electronic sources. The thesis will be divided into three main chapters: “Gender”, “The Middle Ages” will be the constituents of the theoretical part, chapter “Marriage and Adultery in the Canterbury Tales from the Gender Point of View” will apply the acquired knowledge on selected Tales. The first section will review the secondary sources; the second part will attempt to conclude the research.
2 Gender

2.1 Why Do We Talk About Gender at All?

We can usually differentiate the two sexes from each other very easily thanks to the appearance that is typical for them. Not only we can usually say who is a male and who is a female thanks to the secondary sexual characteristics that start to appear during puberty, moreover people tend to support their feminine or masculine looks by exercising, the way they dress, etc.

Women are very often considered to be the weaker, more emotional, sometimes hysterical sex, while men are said to be the stronger and rational one. Only few ask what actually our biological heritage is and what the expectations of our society are. There are some societies where a woman is the breadwinner, while a man stays at home and takes care of the household and children (Valdrová 10).

The concept of men and women’s roles is not only the matter of different societies and cultures, but also the matter of the time people live in. It is clear that there were different expectations of men and women’s behaviour, appearance and even education during the mankind history, which is reflected in various classic works and even in the Bible.

As the men and women’s roles are dictated by the time and the society, biological factors are not so much important anymore and the ‘social sex’ = gender is employed (Valdrová 10). It simply means that it no longer matters whether we are male or female, but rather whether we behave as we are expected to and whether we act accordingly to the general idea about our gender.

The subject of the gender studies is the relationship between our sex and its social roles, which are then worked on in different social backgrounds. Social roles include expectations which the society projects on both sexes, needless to say that the expectations differ for men and women, in other societies and in time. As Jarkovská suggests “The concept of gender describes psychological, social, historical and cultural differences” (21).
‘Gender stereotypes’ (Jarkovská 20) are then prejudices concerning the behaviour of men and women. We can imagine them as some norms that do not allow anybody to ‘deviate’ from them. These stereotypes are present in every society and are not therefore the same for each one of them. One of these stereotypes is the belief that men should not cry and that they should not display their feelings in public (Jarkovská 20). Other one is the general feeling that a man is the one who should propose to a woman. Both of these stereotypes would very probably evoke the ‘unmanliness’ of the man and the later the ‘unfamininity’ of the woman.

Gender is examined by the sociology where there are distinguished two main paradigms that look into this phenomenon: the structural functionalism and the feminist sociology. The first paradigm was developed by Parsons and was taken as the main point of view for sociologists from 40th to 60th years of the 20th century; it discussed the social/gender roles mainly from the male point of view, as it was thought to have been the superior sex. This view believed that the differences between male and female roles are given by nature. The later paradigm believes that both sexes are equal and it tries to battle against the theory based on the patriarchal principles and sexism, it focuses not only on the feminine point of view, but it also examines the masculine social roles (Renzetti 29).

It is worth noticing that men were for a long time the privileged sex. They had power, social status, and means of making a living, whereas women were completely dependent upon men socially and economically, they could be educated, nevertheless they were expected to stay at home being merely responsible for the actual existence and well-being of their family, therefore were considered inferior, for we tend to perceive the housework and taking care of children to be a relaxing, easy and undemanding work, which those who have been on maternity leave would strictly deny. The structural functionalism supported this division of social roles by providing the theoretical interpretation of the evolution of the mankind which they called ‘the theory of a man-hunter’. They believe that the roles of humans started to differentiate because of the inability of females to move around freely with their children so they were bound to the safe place, while males started to provide the proverbial ‘bread’ and protection (Renzetti 25).
The gender studies are then an offspring of the feminism, whose origins are in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and it is a name for complex of ideologies, social theories and political movements, whose goal is to study and eliminate the phenomena that we understand to be the part of oppressing women as a social group. Its intended achievements were to acknowledge women the same rights that were already granted to men, which were basic civil rights as suffrage, right to property, education, and protection and to improve their living conditions (Sokačová).

The beginning of the women’s right movement in Europe dates back to the French revolution during which women started to act towards their equality with men. The leader of the era was Olympe de Gouges who wanted the state to acknowledge women as humans and citizens. She was executed for this effort because she was said to betray her female role by engaging in the political matters (Sokačová).

The feminist movement took place in two waves: The first wave wanted to achieve the confirmation of the basic human rights for women, mainly suffrage and education. These goals were won before the Second World War and the activity of the movement stagnated during this event. The second wave wanted to grant women the equal rights and chances in their employment, education and other social spheres of life, because women had been recognized equal, but they were still put into the inferior positions; they were excluded from social life, believing that they should stay at home (Sokačová), which has been proven to be wrong presumption as the women had proven their ability to stand in for men in various field of occupation during the WWII.

According to Oakley, the feminist movement in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was not the first try of women to fight for their rights and more equal social status. She documents it on two papers which were written in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century: \textit{Hic Mulier} and \textit{Haec Vir}. The first paper is the criticism of the contemporary women’s movement and women’s behaviour. The second one is, on the other hand, a piece of work which claims that women should have the same rights as men (16). Oakley also points out that every change of thinking about social and gender roles could be linked to some historical event that had proven contemporary ideals to be wrong (urbanization, Black Death, the reign of Elizabeth I, World Wars).
Authorities claim that the feminist movement can be perceived as having three stages: during the first stage, feminist sociologists noticed that the society is seen and reflected from the male point of view overall excluding women from it, meaning that men were considered have more important contribution to the development of the society; the second stage then worked on including women’s view into earlier sociology works, developing the term gender; and the final stage is the criticism of the feminist efforts to include the women’s view into the sociology (Harrington et al. 314). The criticism is based on the fact that the feminists took as their model the free middle-class Caucasian woman and that they did not take account of the situation of women belonging to other than Caucasian race, who did not have the same opportunities because of their roots and social status of unequal human being, not only a sex (Harrington et al. 330).
2.2 Gender Family Theories

According to sociologists, family is a hierarchical arrangement of people of different social roles and powers, which are affected by various circumstances, as were demonstrated in the previous chapters, the perspectives from which we explore the partnership are influenced by our religious orientation; by the economic power of the partners; and the environment from which the married couple comes from. The environment is of course the cultural and social background of the couple and it is the reason why people should get to know each other’s roots before they get married, as it can spare them unpleasant surprises.

To give one example, in Japan, there is a custom that allows a husband to withdraw from his marital duties after a ten-year-relationship and to be involved in extramarital intercourse. Therefore, his wife becomes a mere educator of his children, a cook and a charwoman (Bresserová).

It is considered that the contemporary family patterns are influenced by the development of the “town or bourgeois family model” from the 17th and 18th century (Jandourek 166). Families were patriarchal, man represented his family in the society, and if needed, at the court; he was also the breadwinner of the family and his social status predestined the status of his family. Jandourek points out that the partnership had been based on the mutual sympathies; nevertheless visits of the brothel were common routine, applying the ‘double moral’ here, explaining that it expresses the difference between pretended and real standard behaviour in the society (116).

Let us remind Parson’s well-known family theory from the forties to sixties of the last century. He based his theory on the presumption that the social roles are inborn and that they had developed from the need of the Homo erectus society to protect its weaker members (the theory of a man-hunter); this is the structural functionalist’s view. The patriarchal model of the family with “father the provider, non-profitable mother and children” is perceived to be the model for the Parsons theory on differentiation of the social roles within the family (Jandourek 117). Parsons applies his theory on a separate, nuclear family unit, meaning the parents and
their children. But it is a must to take under consideration the fact that people are no longer, in the most cases, left without the help of their parents (grandparents to their children) and their siblings. Nonetheless, Parsons’s model identical in many features with what the Church describes to be the ideal family: female role is in the household, she is a wife, a mother and an emotional core of the family. Father’s role, on the other hand, is outside the family, his task is to represent the family in the society and to provide sufficient means and protection.

Even though Parsons Theory comes from the different century, we can see that the patterns he represented there are still in use. Women are still perceived as those who should stay at home and take care of children and to have interests concerning (and focused) on the household. Nowadays it is normal for a woman to have a job where she spends as many hours as her husband, but after arrival at home she has, unlike her husband, another job, yet unpaid and rarely appreciated by others, for it is considered by the majority being the female duty to do it; on the hand, men expect to be appreciated and ‘rewarded’ when doing with housework, for it is an extra work they do not have actually do. Nevertheless, we have to admit, that it is becoming more common for partners to divide housework, but still we might come across the mocking insinuations that men doing the housework are uxorious.
2.3 Religion as Mean of Forming Gender

According to Renzetti, people have always believed in some supernatural powers which have command of their lives and that irrespective of the differences in the teachings the religion is universal in every culture. Religion provides feeling of belonging to some group of people, who have similar values, provides people with answers on existential questions and gives people the set of rules according to which they are to behave (418).

Renzetti mentions that the oldest religions worshipped goddesses who were told to be in some cases even stronger that gods of the same religion (422), they were goddesses of harvest and fertility, which we can understand as their female aspects, but they were also considered to be the legislators, warriors and wise advisors (424), which were, and still are, considered to be male aspects. Goddesses were seen as wise and powerful beings having power over life cycle, but Renzetti admits that it was probably partially caused by the lack of knowledge of the men’s part in the procreation process and that with the rising acquaintance of it the cults of goddesses were slowly declining (425). The remainders of these cults were reflected in the witchcraft (Ginzburg qtd. in Renzetti 426) and the meaning of the term ‘witch’ (wise one), which was used to name people practicing the magic, indicates how these people, usually women, were seen (Renzetti 426).

Renzetti also introduces the concept that made the Church to persecute witches: the fact that the ‘witches’ had power over life circle. Midwife was called on when a woman was delivering a baby, a herbalist was there when people were sick and she also knew herbs that could cause an abortion, and being the last hope for dying people, she was called for before the priests were inevitable, so their task was to baptise the baby and to give absolutions before death (427).

The religion as we know it today is usually patriarchal. The three major religions all carry out rules that restrict women from practising some or all rituals in church; we talk about Catholic Church, Judaism and Islam. Men have more religious authorities than women; they also, when in the service of the God, can perform particular rituals which women cannot.
This paper focuses on the Catholic Church as it was the main church in the Great Britain during Geoffrey Chaucer’s lifetime, to demonstrate the differences in the view of gender as we know it and the influence of the religion on the roles of men and women in the society and their view on the family roles.

2.3.1 The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church (or the Roman Catholic Church) is a widespread religion that has many branches with minor differences on perceiving the Bible and addressing God. The mutual belief in Jesus as their Saviour and the Son of God is the reason why they are in total called Christians.

The Church developed from Judaism by accepting Jesus as the Saviour, but only after His death (around the year 33 A.D.), because Jesus Himself was a Jew and His mission on the Earth was to save Jews, we should not label Him as the first Christian.

The Catholic Church has exclusively patriarchal hierarchy, which means that men have superordinate positions over women. Women usually do not serve Masses and cannot provide rituals which men can, they also cannot be consecrated to priests or bishops, which is very often defended by Church authorities with the fact that Jesus’s apostles were men. On the other hand, it is argued that in the beginnings of the Church, women helped to spread the Word of the Bible and they were missionaries together with men (Renzetti 436).

The joint sign of Christianity and Judaism is the differentiation of male and female roles. The fundamental role of a woman is to be a good wife and loving mother, in the manner of the Maid Marry. On the other hand, women are also contrastively depicted in the Bible as seducing and sinning beings (Gen 3.6) and therefore God appointed men to rule over them (Gen 3.16). Nevertheless, Jesus did not imply women to be of lower standing, but he approached them in friendly manners in order to help and guide them, just as to men.
The Catholic Church was for a long time the leading religion of Europe, where it had a strong influence on political manners of states, whose princes were obligated to carry through the rules and laws of the Church as well as their own. They adopted the idol of the Maid Marry as being the model of all women, whose virtues were piety, obedience and purity. Sexual relationships between men and women were allowed only in marriage and even there were recommended mainly in order to conceive a child. As Oakley points out, Victorian women were even seen as not having sexual desires (79).

The basic principles of the Church law concerning the marriage have three pillars: “marriage was formed by the consent of the parties; marital promises followed by sexual intercourse created and indissoluble marriage; any extramarital sexual activity by either a husband or a wife was adultery” (Karras 1010).

As we can see, religion truly is the forming power of our societies, even when it has lost its supreme power over our daily lives. Values that have been inculcated for centuries cannot be changed over few decades and if they still can be heard at our time, the influence that they had in the past must have been remarkable.

Religions influence the way in which people perceive themselves and their roles in the society and among their family. Moreover, the importance of individual members of the family had changed with the change of the cultural background. The roles of the sexes were more equal in those times, when it was necessary for them to cooperate on production of goods which were necessary for surviving, but it will be mentioned later in this work.

To summarize, the ideal woman according to mentioned religion is the one who is pure until her marriage, who is obedient and subordinate to her husband. She satisfies her husband’s needs willingly; nevertheless she bares in mind the purpose of the coitus that is to conceive child. It is her duty to give birth to children and to raise them, her priority is to create warm home and safe environment for her family. Her clothing is moderate and covers almost whole her body.
3 The Middle Ages

3.1 The Period of Geoffrey Chaucer

3.1.1 General Overview

The Medieval society was hierarchically structured feudal society; on the top of which was the Church followed by the King, nobles, knights and peasants, which indicates the inequality of society. Feudal society was occupied mainly with agriculture, which was the main source of living but also with trade in goods that were not easily accessible (textile, salt, perfumes); to be a tradesman meant a lot of travelling to foreign countries which was quite dangerous and therefore it was exclusively male business (Ennen 13). The infrastructure in the Europe was not developed, roads looked more like ditches full of dirt and they led through forests which were dangerous for many reasons – they usually belonged to some lord or king, therefore it was forbidden to trespass, and as the trees grew uncultivated, they provided great hiding place for robbers (Brewer 10).

Middle Ages in Britain could be characterized by the change of social structure of the society, which influenced both the ruling class, inhabitants and the Church. The battle of Hastings took place in 1066 and after the victory of William the Conqueror, Norman rule took place there and the feudal rule was enforced. The system of feudalism consisted of lending the land in return to the service and it established the relation of a lord and a vassal.

The feudal society in England, but not only there, was patriarchal, which means that in the households, where women spent most of the day, the main word had the master of the house (a man) and everyone there was subjected to him, his task was on the other hand to protect them and to represent the family in the court (Ennen 16). The word Familia had originally broader meaning: it covered the relatives as well as the servants which were the part of the household.

There was a large increase in population during the Middle Ages, which came hand in hand with the endeavour to cultivate larger area of land. Peasants in England during this period – because of the relatively small amount of the cultivated land and great increase in population – found it more difficult to harvest enough food which
resulted in the weakening of the feudal system. As a result, peasants needed to find other means of earning money, which led to the development of the crafts and consequently to the movement of people to the towns. This urbanization resulted in the expansion of townspeople and consequently of the market economy (Ennen 17).

The Black Death, a bubonic plague, strake the Europe and England more than once during the Middle Ages. This disease was caused by the fleas that were carried by rats which were common in the towns as a result of the fast growing population in the towns and cities, which were usually enclosed, and the poor hygiene. The impact on society was enormous – the fields were uncultivated, which resulted in the poor harvest and lack of food; the towns were deserted until the plague passed away. The English population fell from approximately four million people to one third of it, which meant that there were few peasants to work on the fields, so lords started to grow cattle, mostly sheep.

The shortened manpower increased the competitiveness of peasants who could choose where they would work accordingly to the wages the lords offered. This was in the contrast with the feudal rule, which basis was to grant a land for service and (not money) and to the fact that peasants were not allowed to work elsewhere without their lords’ permission. This resulted in the Statute of Labourers which forbade Lords to offer money and peasants to leave their villages. This resulted in Peasants Revolt. This Revolt did not bring the feudal system to an immediate end, but it definitely weakened its grounds, because the vassals proved to be skilled warriors and the lords were afraid to force them to work for free on their farms once again, they offered them wages and some were renting the land (Polišenský 61).

3.1.2 The Church in Medieval England

The Church wanted the princes of Europe to recognize it as the sovereign power to which they have to answer; it also wanted to establish the bishops in their kingdoms, which did not come together with agreement. One of the reasons why the Church wanted this power was to gain more influence and hence money.
People who had serious interest in Church were entering monasteries and nunneries, where they could be educated in reading and writing skills. One of the reasons for entering the religious houses could have been the inability to make sufficient living because of the lack of the land. There was also rising dissatisfaction with the wealth and double morale of the representatives of the Church.

There were several changes in marriage law during the Middle Ages: the marriage was considered by the Church to be the unbreakable institution, which was made willingly and freely with the agreement of both fiancés, and it was forbidden between relatives (Ennen 44). That, of course, did not mean that woman could get married to anybody she wanted, because that was usually a decision made by the one who was her guardian – a father or brother(s).

The Church also forbade pre-marital sex, as it highlighted keeping purity before marriage (Ennen 45); moreover, it sufficiently restricted the sexual intercourse in marriage by establishing several weekdays or even weeks to be inappropriate for the intercourse. Among infelicitous occasions belonged “Fridays and Wednesdays, nights before Sundays and before important holiday.” (Ennen 106)

The Church wanted to carry through the public wedding what should have prevented people from marrying their relatives (Ennen 48); the necessity to enter into marriage before the God’s presence and attestants had become the necessity in the 13th century.

The restrictions concerning both marital and pre-marital intercourse were not carried through immediately just because the Church recommended it. Pre-marital intercourse was common, but once the woman conceived she must have got married. Also the public marriage was not the rule until the 9th century, till then people were getting married secretly; and even the secret wedding did not mean that the marriage was not valid (Ennen 106). Brewer also ads that in some cases the marriage would not have to be entirely voluntary, but the moment it happened, it was valid and it was almost impossible to cancel it, even if it had happened under threat (29).

Such cases could have been prosecuted either in the civil or the Church court as ruptus (Dunn 80). Nonetheless, Dunn implies that the sexual offences were tried mostly in the lay court, as the Church court dealt mainly with the cases in which a
cleric was persecuted for violating sexual assault or when the seizure “occurred in the context of the forced consummation of a marriage” (84). Dunn points out that the term *raptus* had various meanings in the medieval era, not only it corresponded to the present-day term ‘rape’, meaning the violent act of forcing a woman to sexual intercourse, but also to the ‘abduction’(80). The ambiguity of the term is observed in so called ‘ravishment’ or ‘prosecution’ narratives coming from that era which were written down and even reformulated by court scribes to answer the writ, so the narratives do not actually convey the real perception of the case by the parties (Dunn 86). Moreover, Dunn also notes down that the woman who was labelled as a victim according to the writ did not necessarily perceive herself as such, for she could have left willingly with her “abductor” (86).

3.1.3 Women in the Medieval Era

The situation of women during the Middle Ages was equivocal. It is quite obvious that women from the country enjoyed different status than townswomen who had also different social position than noble women. From the practical point of view, country women, meaning peasants, were at least at their households more equal than their female contemporaries, because they were needed at fields as well as their husbands; when one of them died, the family could get to the existential crisis.

The position of women in the towns and cities was different. According to Ennen, women were considered independent when they lived in freed towns or cities, they gained citizenship but they were still considered subordinate to men and they were seen as their support (114). On the other hand, they could execute some minor transactions concerning the household and they were allowed to stand in for their husband, nevertheless the guardianship still applied, on the other hand businesswomen enjoyed more self-reliance (Ennen 142).

The town’s craftsmen had developed elaborated system of guilds, which were established to protect its members from the concurrency. Not only had they applied some rules and conditions under which a newcomer could have become a member, but they also thought of the bereaved relatives of the guild member(s). It gives an
interesting insight into the women roles in the society: some guilds allowed a widow to remarry; sometimes she could remarry only if the guild approved of her new husband; some guilds enabled the widow to continue to run her husband’s business as long as she was a widow, sometimes only to sell out the store. Women were also useful tools to gain a membership in the guild (Ennen 145).

Noble women were, of course, desirable wives because of their heritage, but their role in the providing for the family was not immense – if they died, the family’s life was not threatened. On the other hand, it was the noble woman who could enjoy the favour from the knights.

Knighthood had developed from raiding parties of gentry in France, which slowly adapted to the requirements of the Church and kings who were hiring them into their services. This new class had stood somewhere between nobles and soldiers, but it improved their standing to now known heroes, defenders of the faith and honour. The greatest period of growth of the knighthood was the 12th century and its beliefs spread quickly through Europe, even the Queen Eleanor, wife of the English King Henry II, belonged amongst its supporters (Ennen 134).
4 Marriage and Adultery in *The Canterbury Tales* from the Gender Point of View

*The Canterbury Tales* are one of the masterworks of Geoffrey Chaucer, where we can find several views on marriage and infidelity. The inspiration for *The Canterbury Tales* is probably coming from the Italian author Boccaccio, the *Decameron*. These two works bear resemblance to each other both by their constructions and the topics that are discussed in them.

*Decameron* consists of one hundred tales told by a group of ten people in the course of ten days; these people had decided to escape the Black Death and to reside in the countryside until the plague passed. The topics for their stories are chosen by the ‘ruler’ of the day, so the variability is guaranteed.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s original idea was probably to exceed Decameron, as he intended each of his twenty-nine pilgrims to “tell two tales *en route* to Canterbury, /And, coming homeward, tell another two” (*CT* 23). This goal was not accomplished, for *The Canterbury Tales* consists of twenty-four stories, some of which are unfinished and some interrupted by the Host. Cannon comments on the loose frame of *The Canterbury Tales* in the Introduction:

The Canterbury Tales is not only incomplete by design, however, it is unfinished by accident. The two facts are surprisingly related because, […] since it is most likely that the beginning of the Tales was written later, Chaucer must have been revising the Tales to make them more ambitious and more difficult to finish as he went along. He [Chaucer] must have died suddenly (*CT* xiv).

The marriage and adultery in *the Canterbury Tales* will be examined from the gender perspective which means that we will try to find patterns that shed the light on the medieval view of these institutions.

Gender roles in *The Canterbury Tales* more or less answer the expectations of the medieval era, bearing in mind the model of the family, marriage and sexual behaviour, and of course, the social roles, which were patterned on the Church view.
However, some tales represent relatively modern perspective on these social concepts, one of which is described in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale.

*The Canterbury Tales* is told mainly from the male perspective, which is not surprising because the author himself was a male.

Four views on marriage and adultery are applied: the courtly ideal, the Christian ideal, feminine perspective and the way marriage was perceived by common people who were not so much tied by conventions as nobles and who knew that the life did not consist only from a noble deeds.
4.1 The Courtly Ideal of Marriage

The courtly love presented to us in *The Knight's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale* does not have the typical characteristics we would normally expect from this type of a story. Chivalrous romance was a secret romance we could find among the nobles, whose marriages were usually of convenience. The man, knight, usually courted to an already wedded woman, and this secret affair was a good way of making the life less boring, therefore it is no surprise that the relationship was adulterous.

The procedure of a curtly affair was following: a noble man chose his 'mistress' to whom he then served and tried to win her affection, which was shown very rarely and secretly (Britannica). The man usually had to show great effort before he could win his lady.

The *Knight's Tale* is being told mainly from the male perspective and the young knights are depicted as active participants and initiators of the affair in contrast to Emily, who is seen mainly from the ‘outside’. The *Franklin’s Tale* is also told from a male perspective, but the lady is more involved in the happenings during the story, but she is still a passive participant. Matching characteristics with original chivalrous romances then are: the paradigm of courting to a noble woman; the settings of the palaces and chateaux; and the great effort shown by the knights. What we do not find in these stories is the element of adultery, it definitely does not occur in the Knight’s Tale; the Franklin’s Tale is heading that way; nevertheless, it strays from it.

4.1.1 The Knight’s Tale

The *Knight’s Tale* is a tale about two cousins, Palamon and Arcita, who struggle for the love of Emily, sister of Athens’ Queen Hippolyta, former Queen of the “Realm of the Amazons” (CT 25). These young knights were put into the prison tower by Theseus for the time being. One day, they see Emily from the window as she plays freely in the garden and they both fall in love with her, or more accurately to what
she represents to them. The argument starts between cousins over their right to love her. Afterwards, Arcita claims that he might have seen her after Palamon, but that: “Yours is no more than a religious feeling: / Mine is real love, love of a human being.” (CT 32). This justification of Arcita’s love means that Palamon loves the image of a goddess, whereas Arcita the image of a woman. They are both undoubtedly allured by her beauty, because Palamon thinks at first that she must be the personification of Venus:

[She is] lovelier to look upon
Than is the lily on its stalk of green,
And fresher than the May with flowers new
[…] And like an angel out of heaven sang. (CT 29)

Arcita is also pointing out that whilst they are both imprisoned, they shall never meet her personally. Because of their imprisonment we may assume that one of the things Emily represents for the young knights is the freedom, for they are in the tower only able to look out of the window, whereas she can walk in the garden.

The jealousy between Arcita and Palamon grows even stronger when they learn that Arcita is about to be released from prison after his friend interceded with Theseus on his behalf; however, he has to leave Theseus’ land and he is forbidden to come back.

Although Arcita is freed and in Thebes, he has changed so much because of his grief over the fact that he would never see Emily again that he could not be recognized by anyone, so he has decided to risk and to go back to Athens to win his beloved lady.

There he pretends to be a servant and he is hired to serve to Emily and after few years he is promoted to be one of the Theseus’ favourite chamber-squire. Meanwhile, Palamon broke out of prison with the aim to go to Thebes, gather army and go back to Athens to fight with Theseus for Emily’s hand. On his escape, he comes across Arcita who is challenged by Palamon to a duel. Even now, they fight for a woman whose state of mind concerning her love preferences is unknown.
They are caught in the act by Theseus and his court whose rage is softened by women’s lamentations and by recognition that Arcita and Palamon’s actions are ignited by their love for Emily. He calls them his friends and he decides that they will meet again in order to fight for her hand until one of them is killed or taken captive. The sign of the patriarchal society at this moment is that nobody asked Emily whether she would be inclined towards any relationship at all; she is simply expected to obey her master’s command.

After a year, the two of the young knights meet again in Athens with their groups ready to help them win their matter. The day before the battle, Palamon, Arcita and Emily pray to their gods whom they think will help them to solve their problems: Palamon preys to Venus (goddess of love), whereas Arcita to Mars (god of war). Both gods promised to fulfil their servants’ desires and as the result Venus and Mars got into the fight, which was silenced by Saturn and his decision to satisfy both Venus and Mars.

Recognition of Emily’s wishes comes to the light the day before the fight for her hand when we learn that she wants to stay single and a maid, as she declares to Diana: “Oh you chaste goddess, you know well that I / Desire to be a virgin all my life,/ Never to be a mistress or a wife.” (CT 61). This declaration is not as surprising as it might seem in the first moment; the fact that she is the Amazon is known from the beginning.

The next day, the battle is won by Arcita, but unfortunately he mortally wounds himself in a fall off his horse and so Palamon is afterwards wedded to Emily, which means that both gods kept their promises.

The courtly ideal we recognize in this tale is the fight for love of a woman, who is untouchable for both Arcita and Palamon, both of whom feel great sorrow knowing that they might not have their beloved Emily as their wife. Both of them are considered to be Emily’s ‘servants’, even though we know that the one who was really in her service was Arcita. The habit of the knight to choose and serve his ‘mistress’ must be understood in a way that it did not necessarily mean that he was actually her servant, but that he admired her and sang the praises of her (Ennen 133).
Females, for some rare exceptions, are not voiced in this tale. On the other hand the men express their love to Emily and we are aware of the fact that there is a difference in their love towards Emily: as Arcita admitted to Palamon when they were still in the tower, his love for Emily is of a carnal desire, whereas Palomon’s love is more spiritual. This view could be supported by an argument of their choice of gods and even by the cry of the Emily who prayed to her goddess to give her to that man who loves her more: “if my destiny be ordained so / That needs must I must have one of the two, / send me the one that most desires me.” (CT 61). And she was given to Palamon who prayed to Venus for Emily’s love, not for the victory in the battle.

As was suggested in the introduction to this chapter, readers are not witnesses of adulterous love, both of the noble men court their lady in all honesty and their love for her is platonic. The term ‘courtly love’ might have suggested that the lady agreed to wed a man who would have wooed her for some time and who she thought would have deserved her, but instead she is asked by her brother-in-law (king Theseus) to marry Palamon, but there is no chance for her to respond, because she is expected to agree to her lord’s demands as was the custom in those times.

4.1.2 The Franklin’s Tale

The Franklin’s Tale is a tale of a knight and his lady whom he won by his tireless endeavour and his reputation, as it is said in the Tale, it took “many a labour and great enterprise” (CT 294) until she finally agreed to marry him. After a year, Averagus leaves for Britain and Dorigen stays in Penmarch, where she misses her husband so much that her friends try to cheer her up by many different pleasures: they go to beech, but after realising that it makes Dorigen to feel worse, they stop it and they engage in having fun in the gardens and it is where Aurelius, a young squire, confesses his love to Dorigen.

She turns him down, nevertheless she promises him in joke to be his when he clears the “length of Brittany / Of all the rocks upon it” (CT 300). Disappointed by his future view of love with Dorigen, Aurelius desperately prays to Phoebus to flood the seashore for two years and when this plan does not fulfil he goes with his brother
to Orleans to see friends who can practise magic. Consequently, he hires a magician to perform a hallucination of vanished rocks and he goes to her lady to remind her of her promise.

Dorigen feels so bad that she considers rather committing a suicide than to be unfaithful to her husband. When Averagus learns why is his wife so miserable, he sends her to Aurelius to fulfil her promise. Aurelius seeing how much she suffers for the idea to be with another man, he remits her from her promise and sends her back to the husband Averagus.

The theme of courtly love is foreshadowed throughout the story, first when Averagus has to suffer through “Many a labour and great enterprise” (CT 294) before he wins his lady and he promises to be her servant and a good lord and to “follow her in all things, and obey, / as any lover ought to with his lady” (CT 294). Aurelius, although trying really hard never wins Dorigen’s love and when he realises it, he cannot hurt her by forced sexual intercourse, so he renounced his dream so that she could be happy.

Faithful marriage of Averagus and Dorigen is not threatened by Dorigen’s promise given in a moment of rashness, the only thing which threatens their relationship is Dorigen’s resolution to rather kill herself than to ashame her husband. Similarly, Averagus’s true love to her cannot stand the idea of being without her, he’d rather become a cuckold and lose his credit.

4.1.3 Courtly Ideal Summary

To summarize the Knight’s and Franklin’s Tales, both tales are stories of love that is not seized, but won by efforts of the knights, who serve their mistresses. Women are seen as an loveable objects who are to be courted and served, but, on the other hand, they are passive, we are not witnesses of any effort from the ladies; they appear not to have any personal desires.

Even though Aurelius wants Dorigen to keep her promise, he finally retreats his wish, similarly Arcita does not try to seize his Emily but he wants to serve her and he desires to be noticed by his lady.
4.2 The Church Ideal of Marriage

The Church ideal marriage was marriage entered in front of the God with witnesses who could testify that the partners were not relatives. Sexual intercourse was to be performed only to conceive a child since it was believed that the dedication to the sexual pleasure would distract people from their obligations towards the Church.

Marriage was to last for ever, until the death departed the partners. Men were usually free to remarry, whereas women were advised to stay in virginity in their widowhood.

Adultery is considered mortal sin, which was believed to be committed even by the raped woman, because the Catholic Church sees them as temptresses. On the other hand, opinion of the Judaism differs: a raped woman is not considered adulterous because she was involved in the intercourse unwillingly.

4.2.1 The Man of Law’s Tale

The Man of Law’s Tale tells the tale of graceful Constance who is renowned for her beauty and virtues among all people of Rome who say that “There never was another such as her,” they say (CT 119). The tradesmen from Syria hear Romans to talk about her “most perfect beauty, without pride” (CT 119) and as soon as they returned to their homeland, they told their Sultan about her. The message of Constance charmed the Sultan so much that he wanted to take her as his wife:

Her image captured the imagination
And so obsessed the heart of this sultan,
That his sole concern and his one desire
While he had life and breath, was to love her (CT 120).

Consequently, he decided to convert to the Christianity which meant that his nation had to follow his model. His chancellors made the preparations and when
everything was prepared and nothing impeded his marriage, Constance has to have her “sorrow overcome, [...] Knowing too well there is no help for it.” (CT 122). To live in the patriarchal society meant that patrons of the woman decided who the woman would marry. Nonetheless, Constance expresses her sorrow, unlike Emily, who was not given similar opportunity by Chaucer:

‘It is to Barbary, the heathen nation,
That I must go, because it is your will,
[...]
Women are born to bondage, suffering;
To live beneath the dominance of men.’ (CT 123)

Constance knows that she has to obey her father, because he is superordinate to her, all she can do is to complain, but she leaves her mother country anyway. Meanwhile, sultan’s mother sets up an evil plan to destroy everybody who gave up their teachings of Mahomet and when the expedition arrives, they are all murdered, except Constance, who is “bundled” (CT 127) and sent to the sea on the ship.

Constance arrives under the Christ’s protection to Northumberland, where she marries king Alla and conceives him a child. Only one who resists Constance’s charm is Alla’s mother, who plots to get rid of Constance, her religion and son, so Constance is shipped and embarked with her son to the sea again. This time, with one stopover, she lands in the Rome where she resides with the senator and his wife, and where she meets again with her husband there, when he comes there to ask Pope for forgiveness.

There are two kinds of women the Man of Law describes: there is Constance and women who fight against her. The first one is an obedient and faithful woman, who is being tried out by her fate and Christ, and whose qualities make other people to convert to the Christianity, as we can see in the example of “Lady Hemengyld, the governor’s wife,/who] Became a convert through the grace of Christ.” (CT 130) And then there are evil women, the sultaness and Alla’s mother, who plot against Constance and everything she represents – the Church and Christian qualities. ‘The old, evil women’ represent those religions (Islam and infidels), which were seen to be untrue or bad in Christian Europe and which have to be subjected or destroyed.
The Man of Law’s tale also reveals the Christian view on premarital sex and adultery because Constance is twice threatened by strange heathen men. The first time she is tried to be seduced happens before her marriage in the Northumberland. Because of her beauty, one of the local knights tries to persuade her: “So the knight woos her, but it’s all in vain./She won’t be got to sin in any way” (CT 132). The aggrieved knight falsely accuses Constance of a murder, but the God saves her and all in the court “The king, and many another in place,/Were all converted, thanks be to Christ’s grace” (CT 134), in addition “Jesus Christ has made Constance a queen” (CT 135); as we can see, staying pure before marriage can be worth it. To communicate this message could have been the Man of Law’s intention, because the Church, as we mentioned earlier, wanted to prevent people from having pre-marital sexual relationships.

The second time Constance is seized by a man, whom she attracted, was during the stopover in an unknown heathen country after her expulsion from Northumberland.

The castle steward (may God damn his soul,

He was a rogue, a renegade as well!)

Came to the ship alone, and told her [Constance] that

Whether she would or no, he’d be her mate (CT 141).

Here must be said that even though a woman was raped, or otherwise forced to sexual intercourse, she was considered adulterous by the Church. Fortunately for Constance, she was kept “without spot” (CT 141). Some might argue that after exiling to Rome Constance was free, but as we said before, the marriage was cancelled only when one of the spouses died. The Man of Law also condemns the “loathsome lechery” from “debilitate[ing] man’s mind” (CT 141). As was Constance kept ‘without spot’, she did not sin and was a loyal wife to a husband whom she thought forced her to leave him.
The Clerk’s Tale we are being told is the story of an Italian marquis Walter who was begged by his people to get married, as they were afraid that he would die and they would be given into servitude of some cruel master. Walter hears their arguments and requests and he promises to wed, but only under the condition that his servants would not say a word against his will and future wife.

His chosen lady lived in his own estate, noble not by her birth but by her virtues and goodness, and the marquis decides to take her as his wife. He comes to her home, meets her father, and asks him about his opinion concerning the marriage and after her father gives him an approval, he asks Griselda whether she wants to marry him. He has only one condition: that she will always obey him and never disagree with him. She says yes and they get married.

We are told about her goodness, her wisdom and friendly approach to all people, never growing proud or arrogant, always remembering her poor birth and for this all she was loved and honoured by her servants. After some time, Griselda gives a birth to a baby girl, and as much as the marquis is pleased, he has this compulsion to test Griselda’s love and obedience. And decides to test her by taking away their child, whom Griselda thinks is going to die, but Walter secretly sends the baby girl to live with his sister and he wants to see whether Griselda changes her behaviour towards him, but there is no change in her attitude and she seems to love him the same as before.

Few years later, Griselda conceives him a son and Walter decides to put her on test again, so he proceeds with the boy in the same way as he did with his daughter. Griselda obeys him, says no word of disapproval and lets the servant to take her child away from her and Walter is once more satisfied with her unchanged attitude toward him.

The third and final test she must undergo is the faked divorce Walter arranges. Once again, she obeys; moreover, she thanks him to be kind to her all those years they have been together, she gives him all her jewellery and dress back and she
goes to live with her father promising that she shall never marry again as she will always love him.

Walter, seeing that her approach to him does not change, calls on his brother-in-law to bring his children back and finally he reconciles with Griselda saying that he is now sure of her feelings toward him and that he will never put her in a test again.

Griselda shows a lot of patience with her husband’s decisions and it is as though he was the God who can test obedience of his sheep and do whatever he pleases. As she suggests to him when he decides to take away her child: “‘What you wish shall wholeheartedly be obeyed. / My child and I are yours; and you may kill / Or spare what is your own; do as you will’” (CT 223).

The difference between this story, the Knight’s Tale and the Man of Law’s Tale is the fact that neither Emily nor Constance were really asked if they wanted to marry their counterparts, respective to their first ‘husbands to be’, but they had to marry them; in this tale, on the other hand, the marquis asks Griselda if she wanted to marry him, though he wants her total submission. It is as if she was entering the nunnery and giving the woe to the God that she will take whatever he has prepared for her and she would never complain – this kind of unconditional love was expected in the Church and it might be the true reason why the Clerk chose to tell this story, because as he alone suggests: “‘This tale has not been told so that wives should / Imitate Griselda in humility’” (CT 241) and he rationalizes:

For if a woman was so patient

To a mere mortal, how much more ought we

Accept what God sends us without complaint,

For it is reasonable, sirs, that He

Should test what he has made; (CT 242)

It is then observable that the marriage in the Clerk’s Tale is more or less the allegory on the relationship between God and His subjects; nonetheless, there are some features that could have been considered to be the basis of a good marriage: feelings of both partners are mutual, a wife is obedient to her husband and considers
him to be her provider and protector, a husband adores his wife and should take into consideration her feelings and he should not put her on test when not necessary: “as for me, I think it wrong and bad / For a man to test his wife when it is needless, / And subject her to fright, dismay, and anguish” (CT 222). Other important feature of the marriage should be the mutual accomplishments in their lives.
4.3 The Feminine Ideal of Marriage

Whilst the Canterbury Tales’ pilgrims are mostly men, the tales are told from their perspective. Their heroines are beautiful women who deserve to be favoured by all men. So far we have met four women who were exemplary wives and who represented two types of happy marriages: the chivalrous romance where the knights have to deserve their ladies’ love; and Christian love in which the ladies obey their husbands.

The only woman who tells the story about marriage is the Wife of Bath, who considers herself to be “experienced”, being wed five times. Her character could be viewed in two ways: the first view is to take her as a random woman; the second view takes into consideration the fact that this female character could have served to Chaucer as a summary of all women and their negative qualities, so called stock character. After all, the Wife of Bath presents some of her ‘knowledge’ to be the mastery of “any astute wife, who knows what’s what” (CT 156).

The Wife of Bath tells in fact two stories: the first story is a story of her life and the other one is the tale about an Arthurian knight and his getting to know women and their desires, both stories have the same conclusion.

4.3.1 The Wife of Bath’s Prologue

The Wife of Bath introduces herself as an experienced woman which she considers to allow her to talk about marriage matters. She implies that her being wed for so many times is not seen by some to be the right thing and that she was advised not to re-marry after her husband’s death, her answer to this advice is:

You may advise a woman not to wed,

But by no means is advice a command.

[…]
Had virginity be the Lord’s command,

Marriage would at the same time be condemned.

And surely, if no seed were ever sown,

From what, then, could virginity be grown? (CT 151)

Further, she develops the idea of marital sex which according to her opinion serves not only as a means of satisfaction, but also as an instrument of getting what a woman desires from her husband. Here we can see the contradiction to what the Church preferred the sexual intercourse to be – an act of procreation. Furthermore her talking about sex and questioning Christ’s advice do not agree with her gender at all. We would expect woman to talk about her family, maybe about one of her pilgrimages, but definitely not about sex and definitely not in front of men. Nonetheless, she continues telling us about her husbands and she says that “Three were good […], two of them were bad. / The three good ones were very rich and old” (CT 155). Admitting that she was using them, she says that for achieving her goals the woman’s best friends are: “lies, and tears, and spinning” (CT 160).

The fourth husband had a concubine, so Alison started to go out with other men to make her husband jealous and to make him leave his lover.

The fifth husband was twenty years younger than her, and as she admits, he was the only one whom she married not for money, but because of the affection. She gave him her property which she later found to be bad idea because he forbade her to use it freely, moreover he read her about all vicious women who destroyed their husbands “Whenever he had leisure and freedom” and she adds that “He knew more lives and legends about them/ Than there are of good women in the Bible” (CT 167). One day, when she could not bear it anymore, she took his beloved book and destroyed few pages from it. The husband got so upset that he slapped her that she went deaf, he regretted his action so much that he destroyed the rest of the book, gave her freedom to manage her property as well as him and they had no argument ever since.

Alison depicts the marriage as a never-ending story of a constant power struggle between sexes. Men are still seen as the dominant figures, but also too keen on sexual pleasure, which enables women to have power over them, because they
may deny cooperating in the act. The other advantage in which women dominate men is their better eloquence “When I was nice to them, how glad they were!/ For God knows how I’d nag and give them hell!” (CT 155). These benefits enable them to win all kinds of privileges, from material possessions to the greater freedom of choice and actions.

4.3.2 The Wife of Bath’s Tale

Whilst reading The Wife of Bath’s Tale the change of the tone is noticeable, the liveliness of her speech loses on its spark it had in her Prologue, even though the story comes to the same conclusion as her life experience.

She starts to tell the story of an Arthurian knight who was tried for raping a maid and sentenced to death if he had not found out the thing “women most desire” (CT 172). Being given a year to find it out he travels the country and questions people about this matter receiving various answers, but none of which is the same. Troubled by the fact that he failed, he decides to go home and on his way there he meets a woman, who is old and ugly. She promises him to reveal what it is that women most want if he “will do the first thing she requires” (CT 175) in return. The knight agrees and she reveals him the secret:

‘Women desire to have dominion
Over their husbands, and their lovers too;
They want to have mastery over them’ (CT 176)

Telling this at the court the knight wins his life, but the old lady appears and wants him to stand to his promise and to marry her and the knight has no other choice than to keep his promise.

On their wedding night the knight is not able to fulfil his marriage and he complains about the fact that he had to marry an ugly, old and poor woman of a low social rank. She answers this by contemplating that the noble ancestors do not guarantee the nobility of their successors, but that the noble deeds do, and that people
can be considered rich even though they have no money and finally she tells him that:

‘As for your point that I’m loathsome and old,
You’ve then no fear of being made cuckold;
For ugliness and age, it seems to me,
Are the best bodyguards for chastity’ (CT 180).

And after this she gives the knight the opportunity to choose which wife would he like her to be: beautiful, young and unfaithful, or old, ugly and faithful. After a while the knight says that he will leave it to her decision and as a result his wife changes to a beautiful, young and virtuous woman.

Both in her Prologue and the Tale, the Wife of Bath suggests that women want to possess their husbands and to have a command of their actions. It is a fresh and very different standpoint in the contrast with other Tales, where wives are expected to be submissive to their husbands.
4.4 Common View on Marriage

4.4.1 The Miller’s Tale

The Miller’s Tale takes place right after the Knight’s Tale and the Miller swears that his story is as good and as profound as the Knight’s Tale. He admits that he is little drunk, and the Host, seeing that there is no help for it, lets him to tell his story.

The Miller has decided to tell the story of a love triangle of the carpenter, his wife and a student:

The opening of the story introduces us the carpenter who married young and beautiful wife. The Miller comments on the fact that marriages with an age difference are not to remain faithful for a long time “Men ought to wed according to their state,/ For youth and age are often at debate” (CT 84) and that it leads to a jealous behaviour of the husband, “For she was wild and young, and he was old,/and thought she’d likely make him a cuckold” (CT 84). Student Nicholas, who is renting a room in the carpenter’s house and who falls in love with his young wife, is introduced as an amusing companion who likes to flirt with ladies. Nicolas decides to seduce Alison but she turns down his efforts to have her, nonetheless the ‘Fly’ Nicholas does not stop to woo her and he “offered himself so often, / That in the end her heart began to soften” (CT 84) and finally she falls in love with Nicholas and they plot a plan so they can be together without the carpenter catching them ‘in flagrante’. Nicholas comes up with a plan to pretend to foretell the future end of the world and carpenter, because of his superstition nature, he believes Nicolas and he does everything the student advises to protect them against floods.

Because of her beauty, Absolon, the local clerk, falls in love with Alison, too. He woos her, showing his assets and trying to convince her to be with him, not knowing that she has already been charmed by Nicolas.

When the night of the foretold floods comes, Nicolas and Alison crawl out of the shelter the carpenter prepared, and they spend the night together.

Meanwhile, Absolon comes to the carpenter’s house to try his luck once more and to confess his feelings to Alison, but she turns him down with Nicolas
overhearing their conversation. Absolon is angry and he borrows a hot piece of metal from the local blacksmith, he comes back to Alison and interrupts her night with Nicholas once more, this time Nicholas wants to make fun of him, and under the cover of the night he sticks his bottom out of the window and Absolon burns his ass. Nicholas shouts out, wakes up the carpenter, who falls down, and all neighbourhood gathers to see what has happened. Nicholas and Alison makes up a story of how the carpenter went mad and what he wanted them to do. People laugh at the carpenter, he moves out and his wife ends up with the student.

We can see that Alison did not want to end up with Nicolas at first, but she yielded to temptation after some time. She is in fact presented as a weak, yet foxy woman who finds her way to be with her lover, even though she should be faithful to her husband.

Nonetheless, the consideration of the relationship paradigm that is implied here is typical for the medieval society. The man, Nicolas in our case, knows that Alison is married, but it does not discourage him from trying to woo her and consequently from engaging in an intercourse with her. Moreover, we know from the Prologue to the Miller’s Tale, that women are considered to be the ones who cause that man is a cuckold.

The difference of this tale from the others is that here the life is not presented to be always as serious as it was introduced in other Tales, for example in the Clerk’s Tale. In fact, what the Miller could try to imply is the fact that the only one who could be blamed for this situation is the carpenter himself. He married a much younger, appealing woman and he was often on business out of the town.
4.4.1 The Reeve’s Tale

Reeve being insulted by the *Miller’s Tale*, starts a story about a miller who ‘swindles’ his customers, stealing their grain and flour. The miller has married a wife “of noble kin / - it seems her father was the village parson” (*CT* 102) who has been well educated, for “Simkin wouldn’t take a wife, he said, / Unless she were well-brought-up, and a maid, / Lest it mar his freeman status and degree”(*CT* 102).

Miller’s swindles were known in all the country and when one day the Oxford College needed to grind its flour, two young students offered to go to see the miller and to watch out until he does his work.

But the miller found out about their intention and he tricked them by unleashing their horse, subsequent to the realisation that the horse is missing, students left the miller and their grain alone and they went to catch the horse, so the miller was free to steal from them. Students were upset that he fooled them, nevertheless they asked miller for a sleepover and some food. He agreed and on their expense he bought some wine and meat, he feasted with them and when they went to bed, those students could not fall asleep as they pitied themselves for being embarrassed and ashamed so they thought of some plan of revenge. Alan rapes miller’s daughter and takes her maidenhood and the John rapes miller’s wife who is said that “It’s years since she had had so good a bout” (*CT* 109).

These horrible felonies are played down in the *Reeve’s Tale*, because they are justified by the fact that the miller ‘provoked’ them by his theft.

An interesting finding in this tale is the fact that even though the women were raped, they actually enjoyed it and Molly, miller’s daughter, fell in love with Alan and she told him where to find their stolen flour.

The adultery in this tale is not the cause of extramarital love affair as it was in the *Miller’s Tale*, but it was to pay back the miller and to hurt him, for he is jealous of his wife and protective of his “freeman status and degree” (*CT* 102). As we mentioned earlier, once a woman was abducted or raped, she has lost her ‘value’ on the marital marked and it shed a shame on the whole family. The rape might not be
seen so seriously in this tale, but for the miller it practically meant the loss of his ‘degree’.
4.5 Summarizing the Marriage Ideals

To summarize this chapter’s findings, we found out that marriages in *The Canterbury Tales* are as good and stable as the wife who represents the unstable element in the Tales. Wives are representatives of the female aspects in the Canterbury Tales, in which we can recognize the patriarchal system in the society. Lovers, husbands, fathers and sons are in these Tales considered to be the core that should be obeyed by those who need leadership and protection in the dangerous world full of temptation. Women are those who are easily seduced to sin and they are believed not to be able to resist and make their own decisions and therefore they need the guidance and guardianship of men.

*The Canterbury Tales* presents three types of wives and therefore three types of marriages; there are wives who have a strong faith in their protectors, be it their husband, father, brother-in-law or God, and perhaps because of that they are exemplary wives; the other type is the wife who either does not respect her husband or is not strong enough to resist the temptation of the world; and the last prototype is the wife who takes advantages of her husband(s) and who makes them suffer if they do not do as she likes.

Wives fitting the Courtly and Christian Ideal are those who are seen as a model for other wives to take the example of. They are obedient, virtuous, and wise and they are honoured for their goodness of heart. On the other side, they are seen as the objects of the men’s favours and cravings and they are perceived as their property. They are also the passive characters in the Tales who are seduced, taken care of and told what to do by their guardians, of course and who patiently suffer from everything the husband/God prepares for them.

There are also wives that are seen as weak creatures that have the tendency and preposition to sin, not only they are objects of the men’s cravings and revenge, they are also too weak to perform any resistance and they have the tendency to fall in love with their usurpers; they are passive and they do not seduce other men, because they are afraid of their husbands at first, having no intention in being adulterous at
all, but when the potential lover tries, or even surprises them suddenly, they melt and they are ready to do whatever he asks, even to leave their husband.

Finally, there is the wife of Bath, who represents the only active female element in the book, she takes marriage as a means of earning money and the opportunity to make fun and fools of men, and she is ready to take the advantage of all of her tools to achieve her goals. As far as we know she has never been unfaithful, she claims to be “the true wife”, but she admits that she loves to have fun with other men.
5. Conclusion

The aim of my bachelor thesis was to provide the sufficient amount of information about the gender studies, its development and changes in the status of women in the society, and to reflect them in the historical background of the Canterbury Tales, which was the Medieval Era.

The first chapter deals with gender theories, its origins and development throughout history; it denies the opinion that the gender deals only with female issues, and highlights the fact that while the status of women has undergone a large turnover since the 18th century, the male position remained unchanged for many years. It also illustrates the importance of religion and its influence on the formation of the society and its views that affect both social order and the status of the family members. We discussed that the first religions worshiped the goddesses to whom people set even more power than to their male counterparts. Then we focused on the Catholic Church as it was the main religion in Britain during the Middle Ages.

Next chapter summarises the historic events of the Medieval Era in England. It gives a summary of important affair of the era and some interesting facts concerning marriage law, rape and abduction.

The theoretical part concludes the knowledge and provides a study of selected stories from The Canterbury Tales. The stories are divided into four groups according to the medieval life ideal they describe: “The Courtly Ideal”, “The Church Ideal”, “Feminine Ideal” and “Common Marriage”. Courtly Ideal describes marriages which common element is a love that must be won by the man who devotes his life and love to one lady. The Church Ideals try to convince people that when they behave in a certain way they will be rewarded, the last but not least, feminine ideal gives a summary of ideas that men thought women want from their husbands and finally, the common view on marriage presents the lightened life perspective.
Bibliography


Appendices

Picture 1 Geoffrey Chaucer

Picture 2 Pilgrims on the way to Canterbury

Source:
Picture. Pic of the Week: Canterbury Tales. Web. 19 April 2013
Picture 3 Canterbury Cathedral

Source:
Photograph. Canterbury Cathedral. Web. 17 April 2013
<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/canterbury_cathedral.htm>