



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Chaucer's female characters

In the Canterbury Tales:

Born to thralldom and penance,

And to been under mannes governance

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

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Særún Gestsdóttir

Maí 2010

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Enskuskor**

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Abstract

This essay analyzes and compares female narrators and six female characters in *Canterbury Tales* to women's status in England in the fourteenth century and aims to demonstrate that the female narrators and characters are representatives of women in that society, which was patriarchal and misogynist. The essay also contrasts women's characteristics and attributes to the male narrator's, in the *Canterbury Tales*, perspectives on women found in their prologues and tales, analyzing what the text reveals regarding the male narrators opinions or preferences as to admirable and desirable characteristics in women.

It aims to provide answers to the following fundamental questions: how are the female narrators and characters represented? Does their status correspond to women's historical situation in the fourteenth century? Are the female narrators given their own subjectivity or are they merely the voices of the dominant order? Do the female narrators and characters rebel against the patriarchal order or do they accept their inferior role to men? In order to answer these questions women's status in the fourteenth century as seen through historical sources will be looked at; their legal status, prevailing ideas about their inherent qualities, the influence of the clergy, biblical and religious views on gender, and the restrictions women faced in society.

This essay will also demonstrate that in order to be considered a good wife a woman needed to be humble and obedient and to accept her fate as being subject to male authority figure without resistance. However even if these 'good' wives were obedient comments are found in the *Canterbury Tales* indicating that they are in no position to gain control over their lives; which are wholly circumscribed by their body. It also demonstrates that if a woman dared to defy or revolt against the norm in medieval society and obtain power over her own fate she was considered wicked and immoral.

Index

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Women in medieval England.....	4
Chapter 2: Female narrators.....	9
2.1 The Wife of Bath	9
2.2 The Prioress	17
2.3 The Second Nun.....	19
Chapter 3: Female characters within the tales	21
3.1 Alisoun from <i>The Miller's Tale</i> and May from <i>The Merchant's Tale</i>	21
3.2 Custance from <i>The Man of Law's Tale</i> and Griselda from <i>The Clerk's Tale</i>	23
3.3 Emelye from <i>The Knight's Tale</i>	27
3.4 Malyn from <i>The Reeve's Tale</i>	29
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	34

Introduction

“Now how that a woman sholde be sub-
get to hire housbonde, that telleth Seint
Peter. First, in obedience.”
(x (I) 929)¹

Obedience in medieval England was acquired by women, if a woman dared to defy male power she was seen as a wicked women following in the footsteps of Eve. If however a woman stayed true to her husband and remained obedient, no matter how severe her situation became, she could be compared to the Virgin Mary. These very opposite types of women are represented in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* where most of the tales engage with gender relations and reflect the characters’ perspectives towards the opposite sex.² Chaucer portrays the complex relationship between the sexes with irony and humor, a quality which has intrigued both readers and critics through the ages.

One such a relationship is between the Parson and the Wife of Bath. The words of the Parson, quoted above, not only reflect attitude of many of Chaucer’s male narrators and characters towards women but they are also in direct opposition to the words of the Wife of Bath, who defies male authority. This female behavior was not tolerated in patriarchal English medieval society. The Wife of Bath is, without a doubt, one of the major characters when it comes to analyzing the female voice, female life, and female subjectivity in the *Canterbury Tales*.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer creates lifelike characters, describing both their appearance and characteristics. The physical appearance of most of the characters gives the reader a visual image of the characters. Chaucer also gives a sense of credibility by placing the characters in a pilgrimage, which in medieval times was among the few events where

¹ All references to *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed Larry D. Benson, 2008, and cited by fragment and line number .

² See Anna Laskaya *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales* 1995:11.

variety of people would gather together and interact by telling tales.³ It is within these tales that characters such as May, Alisoun and Griselde reflect women's situation within a medieval patriarchal society. However even though women in Chaucer's time were to be obedient and submissive to male authority, he creates female characters in the *Canterbury Tales* that challenge the patriarchal order: the Wife of Bath is the most important and unique of these women. She gains control over her husbands, is the heiress of all their properties and lands, and tries to justify and interpret the written words of holy men in order to equalize women's subservient status to men.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze how Chaucer depicts his female characters in the *Canterbury Tales* and if the tales reflect expected behavior of women in his time, c. 1300-1400. Furthermore its purpose is to analyze if the female characters in the *Canterbury Tales* either submit to male domination, accepting their fate to be in the hands of male authority without argument, or if they subvert male domination, following their own convictions and trying to gain control over their own lives, thus not just being portrayed as 'victims' of fate.

The essay will be built up as followed: it starts by looking at the historical background of women in medieval England, from about 1300 to 1400, how medieval women were mostly excluded from any kind of authority both socially and economically, captives of a patriarchal world. Next the three female narrators will be analyzed. Do they reflect women's historical situation in Chaucer's time or are they in any way rebellious in actions and behavior? Their delineation will also be analyzed: what the description of their appearance in the General Prologue says about their characteristics, and if the prologues before their tales reflect on their inner persona which might alter the perception of their characteristics. It is therefore vital to analyze not only the given facts but also the hidden elements that may be found in factors like clothing, manners, and emotions.

³ See *The Riverside Chaucer*: 4.

Finally, six of the female characters found within the tales will be analyzed, looking at their actions and behavior in contrast to what would have been expected of women in similar situations in Chaucer's time. In this context the male voices within the *Canterbury Tales* come into play; the contrast between expected and real female behavior is found within their words as well as their attitudes towards women.

Chapter 1: Women in medieval England

In order to analyze the female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, an introduction to women's position in medieval England, from around 1300 to 1400, is necessary. This section will look closely at factors which affected women's status in the fourteenth century. These are women's legal status and the inherent qualities attributed to them in discourse, the clergy's perspectives and biblical elements, women's access to economic resources, and the restrictions women faced in order to join a monastery.

In the fourteenth century, women were considered to be subject to male authority figures. To begin with, that male figure was usually the father, and after marriage, a woman became the chattel of her husband. A wife was so dependent on her husband that when it came to her legal status she was not considered a legally competent adult.⁴ After marriage, all her assets instantly came under the husband's control.

Women's inferiority to men is visible from her legal right to inheritance. If the husband passed away, the wife was not first in line to inherit the assets. If the deceased husband had sons or brothers they were his immediate heirs. However, if the sons were too young to claim their legal rights as the heir, their mother, the widow, could take charge of all assets until the son came to an age where he could claim his inheritance.⁵ If the deceased husband had neither sons nor brothers, the wife was the sole heir. This made widows who owned land or property very desirable to men who owned little or no land. However, many widows who owned land and property decided not to remarry; their future was secure and they preferred independence and control over their property.⁶ Being in possession of property was equal to having power in the community; hence women were systematically excluded from such power through laws, thus made inferior to men.

⁴ See Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* 1987:104-105.

⁵ *Ibid* 142-145.

⁶ See P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520*. 1992: 210-211 and Bennett 146.

In some cases, a woman came in possession of the land and property by inheriting, when there was no male heir, and sometimes by other means. Some women gained control over their weaker husband by manipulation, which gained her authority over all or some assets, while the husband lived and even after his death. The wives who obtained such power defied the norm of women's subservient position, insinuated by the clergy quoting holy written texts.

In *Genesis*, God says to Eve "Your desire will be for your husband, /and he will rule over you"⁷ and the clergy disseminated this idea in medieval period. Women were a part of a patriarchal society where the clergy and the aristocracy, ruled by men, established and endorsed female inferiority. The woman was seen as the weaker sex, of less importance, intellectually inferior, emotionally unstable, and morally feeble.⁸ This perspective was supported by the clergy, which taught that women were feebler than men, for it was Eve who was deceived by the devil and tasted the forbidden fruit. Eve then convinced Adam to do the same and caused the human race's exile from the Garden of Eden. Therefore, the church argued that a woman could not be trusted. A woman was also seen as inferior due to the fact that God created a man first and from his ribs he created a woman. The man existed first and is therefore superior, and the woman should obey her superior, just as the first born male is heir to a throne.

In Ephesians 5. 22-23 a New Testament passage, it is claimed that a woman should be a subject to her husband and that the husband is the head of the wife. This was based on the church's interpretation of passages in the Epistles to the Corinthians and the Ephesians.⁹ Women were in every way seen as creatures created to obey and please the male authority figure, mostly their husbands.

⁷ Genesis 3:16.

⁸ See Andrea Hopkins, *Most Wise and Valiant Ladies* 1997:7.

⁹ See Alcuin Blamires "Paradox in the Medieval Gender Doctrine of Head and Body" *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body* 1997:13.

To see the woman as body and the man as head was a common position among the clergy. The idea is related to Aristotle's theory of woman as body, man as soul. Aristotle's conclusion was based on the idea that men and women were binary opposites, and one had to be the inferior of the other. Aristotle considered women as the privation of men, lacking all their privileged qualities, and therefore inferior.¹⁰ Women were identified with the lower elements of matter and passivity. Men, however, were identified with the higher elements and properties of form and activity.¹¹

The clergy used this concept in order to exclude women from authoritative functions and thus direct power, making them dependent on men. The exclusion of women was even endorsed by the Pope when he decreed that priests were not allowed to marry; thus a wife could be of no influence over members of the clergy.¹²

However, the patriarchal social structure in the medieval period did not manage to exclude all women from taking part in the public arena. Historical sources preserved records of women who worked in agriculture alongside their husbands, succeeded in trades such as sewing and weaving, ran their own businesses and managed estates.¹³ These women made an effort to revolt against patriarchal values but faced a difficult life of struggling against a patriarchal order that mostly ensured that women could not gain power in the community nor in the economy. The patriarchal order used any means to prevent this; women were for instance "increasingly deprived of the capacity and right to handle their own property" (McNamara 1989:34). The law also saw to it that the independent working woman had difficulty in surviving on her income alone for they only received half the wages men

¹⁰ See Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: the Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC – AD 1250* 1985:100.

¹¹ Ibid 89.

¹² See Jo Ann Kay McNamara "Victims of Progress: Women and the Twelfth Century." *Female Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Karen Glente and Lisa Winther-Jensen. 1989:27.

¹³ See Hopkins 8.

received for the same work.¹⁴ Thus women were in constant battle against a patriarchal world.

The battle between the sexes was also found in the monasteries, where, like elsewhere, a woman was defined by her family, wealth and social position.¹⁵ It was rather difficult for women to enter a monastery, for their entrance depended on the dowry or contribution made in her name. Another reason for this difficulty to enter a monastery was because the nunneries were provided with less finance. Most of the endowments made by women went to the male houses and only a small amount went to the convent to which she belonged. That caused restrictions on the number of female members in a monastery, for their recruitment could interfere with the infrastructure and the convent's economy. Therefore the amount of endowment or contribution was of the utmost importance, even more so than lineage.¹⁶

It was therefore vital for women who wanted to enter a monastery to have some means of finance. It was by her contribution to the monastery that her position within the monastery was made. If the contribution was sufficient to ensure her a position within a monastery, she became a nun. If a woman was from a family of wealth or royalty her position within the convent was greater than that of a nun, she could become a prioress. Before the thirteenth century, if a woman's contribution to the convent was immense she could become an abbess, without former position within the monastery. However, in late twelfth century all abbesses were from the same family, Anhalt family, which was now theirs by inheritance.¹⁷

These factors all worked against women. The society was patriarchal and made sure women had no opportunity to obtain formal power and had little choice of advancement in society. The norm was maintained by the patriarchal system through the law and the clergy.

¹⁴ See McNamara 1989:35.

¹⁵ Ibid 94.

¹⁶ See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*. 1996:237.

¹⁷ Ibid 280.

The law was used in order to discriminate against women. It prevented women the opportunity to gain independence by reducing their salary by half, and wives were deprived of legal rights such as to property, which made them dependent on male authority. Religion had such power in the fourteenth century that it influenced the prevailing attitude to appropriate gender roles. The clergy taught that women were inferior and should be submissive and this was seen as the norm in late medieval society.

Chapter 2: Female narrators

Chaucer experiments with the female voice through the three female narrators in the *Canterbury Tales*. In the case of the Prioress and the Second Nun he imitates the female voices of religion.¹⁸ They are devoted to their religion and do not in any way defy the patriarchal order. Thus he takes no risk by giving them subjectivity. However, the Wife of Bath is more controversial character. Her actions, behavior, and beliefs are not suitable for a woman of her time. In her marriages she manipulates her husbands to gain control over them and their assets. She challenges the clergy's representation of God's words and alters the perception to her advantage. She is not afraid to talk express her feelings on being a woman in a patriarchal world. She talks of love as an expert and she well might be due to her extensive experience in relationships with men.

2.1 The Wife of Bath

The *General Prologue* begins "A good WIF was ther OF biside BATHE" ([I (A) 445).¹⁹ As the introduction continues her physical appearance gives an idea of her character "Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe" ([I (A) 458), and "Gat-tothed was she, smoothly for to seye" (I (A) 468). This makes the Wife seem more of real person than a fictional character, thus allowing the reader to see her as a representative for women of her status in medieval times.

The Wife's behavior as described in the *General Prologue* is indicative of her characteristics. Her behavior in church "In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon/ That to the offrynge before hire sholdegoon;/ And if ther dide, certeyn so wroth was she/ That she was out of alle charitee"(I (A) 449-452) reflects upon a woman in need of an attention and public recognition of her status. She does not care for other women to 'outshine' her in church. Her many pilgrimages indicate a certain restlessness which reflects on her attitudes and

¹⁸ See Laskaya 176.

¹⁹ From here on the Wife of Bath will be called the Wife.

emotions.²⁰ Her attire as described in the *General Prologue*, colorful clothing and big hats suggests that she, like her clothes, is very flamboyant: “Hir coverchiefs ful fine weren of ground;/I dorste swere they weyden ten pound”(I (A) 453-454), “And on hir feet a paire of spores sharp”(I (A) 473). The Parson in his tale rebukes those who wear “outrageous array of clothyng” (X (I) 411) and sets certain view to which the Wife can be contrasted. She can be analyzed by contrasting her actions and opinions to those of the Parson’s but first and foremost by her own words and actions found in her prologue and by analyzing her choice of a tale.

In the Wife’s prologue Chaucer gives the Wife subjectivity. She contemplates and reflects on her past, being a wife, widow, and a woman in a patriarchal society, and reveals her perspectives, feelings, and beliefs, even if they are subversive to the common attitude in the society to which she belongs. As Rigby argues the Wife not only critiques male scholars for misogyny, she also contradicts them. She uses her knowledge and perception of the written word and alters the interpretation in favor of women.²¹

The Wife’s main reason for to criticize the patriarchal society, is her experience in life; as a wife, as a professional cloth maker, her dealings with the bourgeoisie associated with trading, her traveling, and her experiences with different social classes. The Wife has through her many marriages learned that marriage is established on money and the one who has control over economic assets is the one who has sovereignty.²² In patriarchal society to which the Wife belongs it was normally the husband that had control over money. As stated above, when a woman married, she became the chattel of her husband and all her belongings that being land and/or property became his to govern and this is something the Wife has experienced.

²⁰ See Derek Traversi, *The Canterbury Tales: A Reading* 1983:26-27.

²¹ See S. H. Rigby, “The Wife of Bath, Christine De Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women” *Chaucer Review* Vol. 35. No. 2 (2000): 134.

²² See Mary Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions” *PMLA* Vol. 94. No 2 (1979): 214.

The Wife's prologue centers on how the sexes relate. She revolts against society in her prologue where she struggles to gain 'maistrye' over her husband instead of being submissive, as was expected of woman in her society. She gained 'maistrye' over her first four husbands, who all left her in charge of their lands and goods, and after their death she was heir to their assets. She proves that she did gain in her first four marriages by giving her fifth husband everything she owned "And to hym yaf I al the lond and fee/ That evere was me yeven therbifoore."(III (D) 630-631). She later regretted her decision to give him control over everything she owned "But afterward repented me ful soore"(III (D) 632).

The Wife married her fifth husband "Which that I took for love, and no richesse" (III (D) 526) unlike her previous four husbands. The fifth husband tried to change her ways and beliefs by reading about wicked wives. When the Wife had had her fill of his stories of wicked wives and realized that he would not stop reading about them she tore out pages from his book.

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fine
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde,
(III (D) 788-791).

She would no longer listen to stories of bad wives and knows that these stories were written by men not women. She would not let her husband or the patriarchal social order win her in a battle for autonomy. When she felt that she was being threatened to submissiveness she fought back. In her prologue the Wife describes herself as "Stibourn I was as is a leoness"(III (D) 637). The Wife's stubbornness and experiences in life made her a worthy critic of the patriarchal society and her strongest argument was her knowledge that aspects varied from one person to the next.

In her prologue the Wife implies that there are always two sides to every story. She explains this with a parable of a lion that complains about a picture that shows a man killing a

lion, suggesting that if the lion had painted the picture the outcome would be very different.²³

With this perspective she argues against male-written texts "...book of wikked wyves"(III (D) 685) and says that if women had been able to compose the stories would be quite different.

By God, if womman hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
The wolde han writen of men moore wikked-
nesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.
(III (D) 693-696).

The stories would not reveal wicked women, but would instead uncover a completely different world, where men were guilty of wickedness. The Wife's comments of the written word voice her opinion that it is one-sided, only male absolute.

Her prologue may be seen as a confession where she confesses her sins but furthermore defends them. She has her own way of interpreting the written word and tries to support her interpretations to her best interest. For instance, she contradicts those who say that a person should only marry once, and uses as evidence the fact that Abraham and Jacob had married more than once. She indicates that even though she has been married five times she would marry again when she had found a worthy subject. "Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal/ For soothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al. (III (D) 45-46)" suggesting tha she does not intend to turn away from her perceived sin of remarriage.

The Wife is not a woman who would be chaste declaring "In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument/ As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (III (D) 149-150) and tells of her affairs which occurred if her husband's failed to fulfill her sexual needs. Later she says "As help me God, I was a lusty one" (III (D) 605). Her sexual behavior and needs are in contrast to the Parson's attitude towards sex. The Parson was of the opinion that sex was only a means for

²³ See Carruthers: 209.

procreation and should be engaged in exclusively for that purpose only. Her morals and behaviors are very subversive to this view.

The Parson can be seen as the Wife's antagonist, as he is her opposite in moral and chaste behavior, and it is his view of Christian living to which the Wife can be compared. There are elements of direct contrast between the Wife and the Parson and it is therefore obvious that there is a relation between the two. These elements are the Parson's comments about religious behavior in his tale which can be related to The Wife. Even though Chaucer does not set them up as adversaries, it is not hard to see that the Parson means for his comments to influence and demonstrate the sinful life of the Wife.

The Parson articulates certain views in his tale, which is in fact more of a sermon than a tale, which he bases on his knowledge as a man of God and the clergy. He speaks of women from a clerical point of view, and he constantly cites the words of saints and the Holy Bible. When Chaucer created the Parson he made him a character without any faults or sins. In the *General Prologue* the Parson's portrait is one of a saint: "A good man was ther of religioun"(I (A) 477), and "riche he was of hooly thought and werk."(I (A) 479). Among the words that Chaucer chooses to portray the Parson are: "benygne, diligent, pacient, noble, and discreet" (I (A) 462-526). These are all words of good qualities of a true Christian. The Parson receives no negative portrayals, as Chaucer writes "A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys."(I (A) 524).

Why create a character of such true religion and why place the last tale, the last words, in the mouth of such a narrator? It is in order to emphasize that his sermon, or tale, should be taken seriously? What does that say about the women in the fourteenth century? The Parson, in typical clerical style, believes that women are inferior to men and that women should be subjects to men: "O ye wommen, be ye subgetts to youre housbonde" (X (I) 633). Not only does he say that women are to be subjects to men, but when a woman marries she

becomes one of her husband's possessions, his property, "Thou shalt nat desiren his wif ne none of his thynges"(X (I) 520). When the woman becomes a wife, according to the Parson, she must be obedient: she has no authority, and she can only testify in court with her husband's consent.

One of the Parson's many observations on sin that can be related to the Wife is his perspective on sex and adultery. The Parson says tha "whan a/ womman steleth hir body from hir housbonde/ and yeveth it to hire holour to defoulen hire, / and steleth his soule fro Christ and yeveth it to/ the devel"(X (I) 877) and that it is:

a fouler theft than for to
breke a chirche and stele the chalice, for these
avowtiers breken the temple of God spiritually,
and stelen the vessel of grace, that is the body
and the soule, for which Crist shal destroyen
hem, as seith Seint Paul.
(X (I) 878).

The Parson believes that "fornicacioun,/ that is bitwixe man and womman that been/ nat married, and this is deedly synne and/ agayns nature"(X (I) 864).

The Parson also gives evidence in his tale that a woman should only marry once "o man sholde/ have but o womman, and o womman but o man"(X (I) 920). According to the Wife she has been married five times, so far. Another element that relates the Parson and the Wife are his indications to those who act as she does in church. He says that such behavior demonstrates the very sin of pride²⁴ "his entente in/ swich a proud desir to be magnified and honoured bifore the peple"(X (I) 407).

Last but not least are his beliefs of submissiveness of women to their husbands "O ye women, be ye subgetts to/ youre housbonde as bihoveth in God"(X (I) 632). As the Wife herself has indicated she preferred to be in control, and in her marriages, she made sure she

²⁴ See Rigby 139.

gained authority, with manipulation or by some other cunning means. In his tale, the Parson reflects on woman's status as a wife:

Now how that a womman sholde be sub-
get to hire housbonde, that telleth Seint
Peter. First, in obedience./ And eek, as
seith the decree, a womman that is wyf,
as longe as she is a wyf, she hath noon auctori-
tee to swere ne to bere witness withoute leve
of hir housbonde, that is hire lord; algate, he
sholde be so by resoun./ She sholde eek serven
hym in alle honestee, and been attempree of
hire array.
(X (I) 929-931)

It is as though the Parson is speaking directly to the Wife. She is a woman who would not succumb to the husbands 'auctoritee' and, on the contrary, aimed to make her husbands succumb to hers. The Wife is not afraid to voice her knowledge of misogyny in her society and is not afraid to revolt against patriarchy.

The Wife chooses to tell a tale that reflects the battle between the sexes and tries to display through her tale what it is that women want most. Her knight, is guilty of raping a maiden, "He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,/ Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,/ By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed;" (III (D) 886-888) and is to be judged by the queen. By giving the queen authority to judge, the Wife seizes the role of law and judgment, dominated by men, and allows it to fall into the hand of a female. The queen uses her power to judge and gives him the opportunity to save his life by finding an answer "I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me/ What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (III (D) 904-905).

The Knight finds a woman who is willing to help him if he agrees to marry her, even though she is "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (III (D) 999). The loathsome lady is connected to the Wife's motive to manipulate men with any means available, that being sex,

lust, resentment, and desperation.²⁵ Out of desperation he consents to marry her, thus surrendering his life to the loathsome lady. This reflects the Wife's own desire in marriage "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie hym above" (III (D) 1038-40).

The knight's submissiveness to the loathsome lady is a shift in the power ratio. The rapist knight becomes the victim of oppression just as the maiden was a victim of his rape.²⁶ The knight than marries the loathsome lady which is the culmination of his oppression. After he has married her his submissiveness is complete when he gives her the freedom to choose her appearance and characteristics. She rewards him for his utter subordination by being young, beautiful, true, and "obeyed hym in every thing/ That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (III (D) 1255-1256). By rewarding the knight the Wife demonstrates, as Carter argues, that giving women authority the consequences can be rewarding and even lead to joy.²⁷

The Wife of Bath is the most controversial female character in the *Canterbury Tales*. She is given subjectivity where she reflects on women's position in society. She follows her own path and convictions. Her interpretations of male-written texts are her own, not influenced by the clergy, which in the Wife's opinion is chauvinistic and misogynist. Her motive in life is to change patriarchy or at least demonstrate the effect of women's oppression. She does this by turning the power ratio upside-down and gaining authority over her husbands. Her tale demonstrates the conflict between the sexes and that surrendering authority to a woman can be rewarding for men.

²⁵ See Susan Carter "Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale" *Chaucer Review* Vol. 37. No. 4 (2003): 332-333.

²⁶ Ibid 334.

²⁷ Ibid 339.

2.2 The Prioress

In the *General Prologue* the Prioress's delineation indicates that she is a woman from a wealthy family. Her introduction: "Ther was also a Nonne, a PRIORESSE"(I (A) 118) gives evidence, in light of above information about the position given to women when entering convents, to her wealth and the endowment made to the convent on her behalf. The Prioresses manners are also indications as to her background. Her table manners are impeccable, "At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;"(I (A) 127) and "In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest"(I (A) 132). Her physical features, title, and table manners are that of the aristocracy.²⁸

Her clothes also indicate that she is a woman of good lineage.

Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.
Of small coral aboute hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ter was first write a crowned A,
And after *Amor vincit omnia*.
(I (A) 157-162).

In the medieval times it was not suitable for a woman that had devoted herself to God to give much attention to her attire. There is however evidence that "women of rank continued to display their status in fine clothing and adornment" (Nelson 35-36) and the Prioress's delineation indicates that she did continue to represent her former status even after she entered a convent. Such representation of the Prioress's status may also be found in the fact that she is on a pilgrimage. A prioress when taking her position vows to certain obligations and one such obligation is serving and worshipping God "without going on a journey to seek a shrine, and prioresses were specifically and repeatedly enjoined from going on pilgrimages" (Hoffmann 36). Since the Prioress does not comply with rules she is not completely devoted in her religious practice.

²⁸ See Traversi 24.

Her behavior and possessions are not in contrast to the norm. She weeps if she sees a mouse caught in a trap “She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous/ Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde ”(I (A) 144-145). She owns dogs and feeds with gourmet food “Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde/ With roasted flessch, or milk and watel-breed”(I (A) 146-147). A woman in her position, belonging to a convent, was not to own pets as she does and the food she gives them was unavailable to the poor.²⁹ The Benedictine Rule that dominated in the medieval period had strict rules and demands which monks and nuns were expected to follow and obey. Living in poverty was one of the restrictions.³⁰

The Prioress is given subjectivity. In the prologue she praises the Virgin Mary “Lady, thy bountee, thy magnificence,/ Thy verty and thy grete humylitee” (VII 474-475). In her tale it is the widowed mother and the little boy that she admires. She pities and grieves for the widowed mother, “This poure wydwe” (VII 586) and regards the little boy as a martyr “O matir, sowded to virginitee”(VII 579), indicating that she chooses women and children as admirable characters and men are not. Her opinion regarding men is found in her perspectives on monks: “This abbot, which that was an hooly man/ As monkes been—or elles oghte be” (VII 642-643), indicating that monks have lost their way in serving God, and the fact that it was men who murdered the little ‘clergeon’.³¹ Even though she does not defy the patriarchal order some of the Prioress’s comments indicated that she does not hold men in high regard.

The Prioress’s delineation in the *General Prologue* represents a woman who gained her position in the monastery by means of endowment. It is never said that she is a woman from a wealthy family but her depiction both concerning her manners and behavior give evidence that she once belonged to the aristocracy. Her behavior also indicates that she is not completely devoted to her religious position. She does not follow every rule and obligation

²⁹ See Traversi:25.

³⁰ See J. Patrick Greene, *Medieval Monasteries* 2005: 2.

³¹ See Laskaya 174.

indicating that she is still a woman belonging to secular society, not just to god and holy orders. She observes the differences between the sexes, holding women and children in high regard whereas she believes that men have gone astray.

2.3 The Second Nun

The Second Nun is not described in the *General Prologue*.³² She is only mentioned as one of the pilgrims but receives no delineation. Laskaya believes that since the Nun is not given a portrait, it prevents errors in distinguishing her characteristics.³³ This is not entirely correct. Since the Nun lacks a portrait an air of guessing is left as to her interpretation. The analysis of her identity is very likely to vary from one reader to the next and the fact that she is a pilgrim influences the interpretation and analysis.

When analyzing the Nun, one must consider her prologue and tale. The Nun's subjectivity appears in her reflections on religion, which appears in her prologue. She is given a first-person voice. Her prologue is not controversial, and unlike the Wife, who contradicts male writing, she praises the man who wrote about St. Cecile: "Of whom that Bernard list so wel to write" (VIII (G) 30).

The Nun chooses to tell a tale about a woman saint who preached Christianity and converted many to her religion. She married a young man named Valerian and even though she was married she maintained her virginity because of her religion. St. Cecile was a woman not afraid to defend her belief in God. With courage she used her faith and religious beliefs to defy the standards in marriage. When a woman became a wife her first duty was to be submissive and obedient to the husband.³⁴ It was in the husband's right to claim his wife's virginity and consummate the marriage with sexual intercourse. St. Cecile, however, tells her

³² From here on the Second Nun will be referred to as the Nun.

³³ See Laskaya 172.

³⁴ See L. F. Salzman, *English Life in the Middle Ages* 1945:254.

husband that if he attempts to claim her virginity he will die. Therefore she rejects traditional course of marriage.

St. Cecile does not just reject the husband's right to dominance, for later in the tale she rejects male authority wholesale:

Almachius seyde, "Ne takestow noon heede
Of my power?" And she answerde hym this:
"Youre myght," quod she, "ful litel is to dreede,
For every mortal mannes power nys
But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys.
For with a needles poynt, whan it is blowe,
May al the boost of it be leyd full lowe."
(VIII (G) 435-441)

Even though her rejection is not to confront patriarchal order but to verify that her soul and life are in her God's hands she does defy male and mortal authority. St. Cecile beliefs the only authority she must answer to is that of God.

As a fourteenth-century nun, the Nun's true belief regarding authority is found in her tale. The Nun chooses her heroine out of admiration, a heroine who believes that only God has authority over her, suggesting that the Nun believes the same. The Nun's characteristics can be distinguished by comparing her to St. Cecile, who lived her life with abstinence from sex, devotion, faith, and religious conviction.

Chapter 3: Female characters within the tales

The female characters within the tales can in light of the information discussed above be analyzed from two perspectives; firstly from women's historical situation in medieval England, and secondly by the male views on women articulated in the *Canterbury Tales*. The female characters that will be analyzed in this section are found within tales told by male narrators. Consequently the female characters most often represent their narrator's stereotyped perceptions of women and range from being wicked young girls that cheat on their husbands to women of virtue and obedience.

The six female analyzed below reflect prevailing male attitudes to women. May and Alisoun represent wicked disobedient wives; their opposites, Griselda and Custance are representatives for the ideal 'good' wife. Malyn and Emelye represent women who become objects to be fought over, caught between battling opponents.

3.1 Alisoun from *The Miller's Tale* and May from *The Merchant's Tale*

Alisoun and May are very similar characters found within two tales told by the Miller and the Merchant. They are both young girls/women, Alisoun the age of eighteen and May, as her name suggests, represents spring, youth, when flowers start to blossom and life begins.³⁵ They also have in common extreme beauty and youthfulness. In the *Miller's Tale* Alisoun is described thus "Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal/ As any wezele hir body gent and smal"(I (A) 3233-3234) and "She was ful moore blissful on to see/ Than is the newe perejonette tree"(I (A) 3247-3248. May is also described in similar terms; "she was lyk the brighte morwe of May/ Fulfild of alle beautee and plesaunce"(IV (E) 1748-1749). It is not only youth and beauty that they have in common. Alisoun and May are also in very similar

³⁵ See Traversi 138.

situations, they are married to much older men and their beauty provokes the jealousy of their husbands causing both to be held ‘captives’ by their husbands.

In Alisoun’s case her husband was extremely cautious as to her whereabouts and always kept her close at hand “Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage/ For she was wylde and yong, and he was old/ And demed hymself been lik a cokewold”(I (A) 3224-3226)”. May was in similar situation. She married a man who had never been married even though he was far older than she “And sixty yeer a wyflee man was hee” (IV (E) 1248). He was also a jealous man who would not let his wife out of his sight “

Which jalousye it was so outrageous
That neither in halle, n’yn noon oother hous,
Ne in noon oother place, neverthemo,
He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go,
But if that he had hond on hire alway;”
(IV (E) 2087-2091)

Despite their jealous husbands and possessive husbands, the two young girls manage to find a way to be with younger suitors. They fall into sin and betray their husbands. Thus the carpenter’s and January’s fear of being ‘cokewold’ comes true and May and Alisoun become disobedient, wicked wives, much like in the books the Wife of Bath’s fifth husband used to read.

The Miller voices his opinion on women in his prologue. He suggests that women cannot be trusted, for every man that has a wife is in danger of being cuckolded. Only those who have no wife are safe from such disgrace “Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold ”(I (A) 3152). When the Miller says that “An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf/Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf” (I(A)3163-3164) his meaning is not entirely clear. At first glance, his words may be understood as meaning that men should allow their wives to have secrets. However, this seems to be contradicted in the Miller’s tale, in which the carpenter follows this advice ends up being cuckolded and made a fool of by his wife and her lover. The

meaning of the Miller's advice is to demonstrate what happens if a man allows his wife to keep secrets.³⁶

The Merchant also voices his opinion on women in his prologue where he admires Griselda and reveals that his wife was her opposite in every aspect "Ther is a long and large difference/ Bitwix Grislidis grete pacience/ And of my wyf the passing crueltee"(IV (E) 1223-1225). He thus indicates that he would rather have a wife as submissive and obedient as Griselda than a woman as shrewish as his wife. The Miller and the Merchant both share a common view and that is that men should have authority over their wives, whom should succumb to their husbands. A wife should obey and please her husband, fulfilling his every desire.

These two young girls epitomize the clergy's idea of wicked women; they are feeble and fall into sin and betrayal easily. However, they also represent medieval women who had no control over their lives and were first and foremost subjects of a male authority figure, a father or a husband. They are young women most likely forced into marriage by their father. The suitors are significantly older than the brides and thus their future is one of a long widowhood. The very fact that they cheated on their husbands reflect a certain rebellion against their situation. They rebel against the very fact of being subjects and captives of their husbands and show a will of their own, longing for a relationship to their liking and with partners of similar age. Hence they stand up against a patriarchal system where the choice of a husband was normally the father's and not the bride's, thus lacking autonomy.

3.2 Custance from *The Man of Law's Tale* and Griselda from *The Clerk's Tale*

Opposites of the wicked, disobedient, adulterous May and Alisoun are the virtuous, obedient, and faithful Custance and Griselda. Custance and Griselda share a common characteristic,

³⁶ See Traversi 64-65.

obedience; they obey their father and their husband. Because of this quality they are forced to endure much suffering, inflicted on them by their male kin.

“Custance embodies Chaucer’s perception of the isolation of women in his day” (Frank Jr. 152). Women were often separated from their family and friends when they married. Such is the case with Custance, who is forced to leave her home to a different country and marry a man of whom she knows nothing:

Allas, what wonder is it thogh she wepte,
That shal be sent to strange nacioun
Fro freendes that so tenderly hire kepte,
And to be bounden under subjeccioun
Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun?
(II (B¹) 267-271).

It was not her decision as to whom she would marry, it was her father’s. Even though she does comply with her father’s will she does suggest that her situation, her marriage, is not her choice and that she is in no position to change it being an obedient woman in patriarchal world. Even though Custance is obedient and does not defy patriarchy, she is given subjectivity where she reflects on her status as a woman in her society:

“Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun
I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;
But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun
So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!
I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille!
Womman are born to thralldom and penance,
And to been under mannes governance.”
(II (B¹) 281-287).

However, Custance’s fight against the rapist, “For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily/ The thief fil over bord al sodeynly/ And in the see he dreynte for vengeance;/ (II (B¹) 921-923), indicates that she would not willingly surrender herself to male authority if it was not his by right.³⁷ She does obey her father and her husband but the rapist has no authority over her, which gives her the right to fight back, which she does.

³⁷ See Saunders 285-286.

The Man of Law's perspective on women is that the sin of Eve has infested itself in every woman and that she is doomed to follow in the footsteps of Eve, cursed by her sin.³⁸

O Sathan, envious syn thilke day
That thou were chaced from oure heritage,
Wel knowestow to wommen the olde way!
Thou madest Eva brynge us in servage:
Thou wolt fordoon this Cristen marriage,
Thyn instrument so, weylaway the while!
Makestow of wommen, whan thou wolt bigile.
(II (b¹) 358-371)

A woman is not to be trusted for she is sinful and because of woman, mankind was exiled from heaven. However the female character that the Man of Law chooses as a heroine in his tale does not represent a sinful woman. He tells a story of a woman that represents the virtues of the Virgin Mary. Custance is very much devoted to her religion, Christianity. She prays and is never inconsistent in her beliefs. In the tale, it is her religion that saves her on numerous occasions. She is set out to sea on a drifting boat and survives because "The wyl of Crist was that she sholde abyde" (II (B¹) 511). Her religion also saves her from rape and she receives help from heavenly creatures: "But blissful Marie heelp hire right anon" (II (B¹) 920) and "thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance" (II (B¹) 924). By telling a story of a deeply religious and obedient woman, the Man of Law contradicts his own perspective of women.

Custance's sufferings are tests of faith. Griselda's sufferings are inflicted upon her by her husband, who wants to test her obedience and submissiveness. When she receives a proposal from a marquise, he requires that she consent to his every demand.

"I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
Swere tis, and here I swere oure alliance."

³⁸ See Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* 1968:115-117.

(IV (E) 351-357).

Griselda agrees to his demands and her first test was to endure nakedness. She was to come to his court with nothing from her former home. She was therefore undressed, “And for that no thyng of hir olde geere/ She sholde brynge into his hous, he bad/ That wommen sholde dispoillen hire right there” (IV (E) 372-374), suggesting that she was unworthy because of her lineage. If she was to become the marquise wife he would not have any indications as to her social position. This, however, was only the first test she was to face in order to prove her obedience.

The marquise becomes obsessed by testing his young bride and the tests he inflicts upon her are inhumane. After Griselda has given birth to a baby girl, the marquise decides to test Griselda’s obedience: “This markys in his herte longeth so/ To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe,” (IV (E) 451-452). He makes Griselda believe that he means to kill their daughter. Griselda consents to this showing that she is obedient and submissive to the marquise. After she gives birth to a baby boy, the marquise decides to test Griselda again and plays the same game as before. He makes her believe that her son is to be killed just like their daughter, and Griselda complies.

The last test she faces is to serve her husband in preparation for his wedding to a new bride. As before, Griselda is constant in her obedience and serves the marquise. When he asks her if she is not happy about his new arrangement she replies ““Nat oonly, lord, that I am glad,” quod she,/ “To doon youre lust, but I desire also/ Yow to serve and plese in my degree” (IV (E) 967-969). When she has shown the marquise that she is steadfast in her obedience and her only wish is to fulfill his every desire he rewards her with returning their children and he never tests her again.

Griselda, like Custance represents isolated women in the fourteenth century. She is isolated from her husband, who constantly tests her, and from her children.³⁹ Chaucer shows more sympathy for Griselda's and Custance's isolation than he does for May and Alisoun. The reason for his sympathy for Custance and Griselda is that they overcome their obstacles with faith and obedience and they never try to disobey or trick their husbands, as May and Alisoun do. By creating such opposite women Chaucer displays a polarized picture. The latter two are representatives for wicked, disobedient women but Griselda and Custance represent the ideal woman who serves and obeys her male authority figure, that being a father and/or husband.

3.3 Emelye from *The Knight's Tale*

Emelye in the *Knight's Tale* represent a woman who has no autonomy. She is a young girl, the sister of the captured Amazon queen, Ypolita, and a captive herself. Theseus, their captor, makes Ypolita his queen and thus makes his conquered queen his trophy. His victory over women is in context of the clergy's and patriarchy's goal to exclude women from any kind of power. Ypolita is a woman forced into obedience and deprived of her formal power. Emelye is also a prize won in war and she is an object over which men can fight and win.⁴⁰

In the story Emelye, unknowingly, becomes the subject of Palamon's and Arcite's fascination. Her beauty strikes the two young men's heart like an arrow, a courtly love trope is the so-called happy ending in the Knight's tale, marriage between a knight and his lady.⁴¹ Despite Emelye's wish to remain a virgin she becomes the reason for the two young knights, cousins, to fight and the object of their power struggle.

³⁹ See Robert Worth Frank Jr., "The Canterbury Tales III: Pathos" *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion* 1986: 156.

⁴⁰ See Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* 2001:287.

⁴¹ See Whittock 60.

In the end one of the knight, Arcite, is victorious, and has by defeat won Emelye's hand in marriage; however, he dies of his wounds. Theseus then decides to give Emelye to Palamon. Emelye through all this never says a word of objection for it is not in her right to do so, being subject to male authority. She represents the obedient woman that accepts the patriarchal order even though she comes from a line of strong, independent women, Amazons. She is the clergy's ideal submissive woman that does not rebel against her position and accepts having no power concerning her own future.

If Emelye is analyzed from the male perspective found within the *Canterbury Tales*, she contradicts the idea that women are deceitful and fickle. Even though her wish to remain a virgin is not met, she repays Palamon's love with love, "And Emelye hym loveth so tenderly"(I (A) 3103). It is her wish to remain a virgin that gives her an affinity with the Virgin Mary and she is therefore not compared to the sinful Eve. The male characters' opinion of women being untrustworthy does not apply to Emelye. It is never indicated that she would be unfaithful to her knight; rather, the text suggests that they lived happily ever after: "That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene/ Of jalousie or any oother teene./ Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye"(I (A) 3105-3107).

Emelye is a model for women in the audience at least from the clergy's and the patriarchal order's point of view. Her characteristics, obedience and submissiveness, are ideal for the clergy's teaching and her behavior is an example of perfect behavior men expected of women. It is only from her wish of chastity that her will and desires in life is demonstrated; however, she accepts that it is not in her power to fulfill her wish. All she can do is pray and hope, never act.

3.4 Malyn from *The Reeve's Tale*

Malyn is the daughter of the corrupted miller in the *Reeve's Tale*. She is a woman caught in a conflict between males. In the tale she receives little notice but pays a price for being her father's daughter. Aleyn plans revenge against the Miller for stealing their grain and his act of vengeance involves raping the Miller's daughter, Malyn. This act of violence will greatly damage the Miller for it involves destroying the prospects of his daughter to marry someone of good lineage.⁴² Women's chastity before marriage was of the upmost importance in the fourteenth century and if a woman had lost her virginity she was unlikely to marry. This is indicated by the vengeance that Aleyn decided would hurt the Miller the most, taking from him the prospect of marrying his daughter to someone of good lineage. However the rape which was ultimately aimed to disgrace the Miller was indeed more damaging for young Malyn.

Aleyn who is Malyn's rapist is also the one that brings attention to her as a person. He is the first to call her by name, "Fare weel, Malyne, sweete wight" (I (A) 4236) and thus she becomes more than just means of vengeance she becomes a person.⁴³ This draws attention to her character and allows judgment as to her characteristics and her rape. In the *Reeve's tale* she is described thus:

This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,
With kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,
With buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye.
(I (A) 3973-3975)

She is called a 'wenche' which Chaucer usually used to demonstrate a woman that was sexually voracious. Chaucer does however not give evidence as to her morality as he does in the other cases where he uses the same word. As Kohanski argues Chaucer leaves an air of

⁴² See Saunders 299 and Whittock 100.

⁴³ See Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer The Canterbury Tales* 1989: 113.

guessing allowing the diverse interpretation of the word.⁴⁴ How then can the word ‘wenche’ in Malyn’s case be interpreted?

As Kohanski points out, Malyn has in past scholarly discourse not been recognized as one of the speaking character in the tale.⁴⁵ Yet in the tale, her voice is heard and it gives an indication as to her characteristics as well as her feelings towards her rapist.

“Now. deere lemman,” quod she, “go, far weel!
But er thow go, o thing I wol thee telle:
Whan that thou wendst homeward by the melle,
Which that I heelp my sire for to stele.
And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe!”
And with that word almoost she gan to wepe.
(I (A) 4240-4248)

She seems to hold him in high regards as her words “deere lemman”(I (A) 4240) suggest, and her emotional reactions for his departure indicate her regret that she will never see him again. Even though Aleyn is the one who robs Malyn of her future and condemns her to live life as a spinster, she does not loathe or hate him. This does indeed imply that she had been willing to have sex with him, but is it that simple.

In order to analyze Malyn’s desire towards going to bed with Aleyn it is necessary to look at the very act of the rape. The rape of Malyn is describes thus:

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.
This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,
Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
That it had been to late for to crie,
(I (A) 4193-4196)

If she had been willing to sleep with Aleyn it seems that she should have expected him to sneak to her bed, which she clearly does not. She was fast asleep and therefore she could not have agreed to have sexual intercourse with Aleyn. Furthermore, when she did awake it was too late for her to cry for help, indicating that penetration had already taken place and her virginity been stolen.

⁴⁴ See Tamarah Kohanski, “In Search of Malyne” *The Chaucer Review* Vol. 27. No 3 (1993): 229.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 228.

As regarding her words towards her rapist, it shows that she knew of her robbed prospects to marry and that Aleyn was now probably the only man who could or would take her hand in marriage. Why not treat him with kindness, hoping that he would think of marrying her. The Miller's reaction when he hears of the rape does not stem from his affection regarding his daughter but from the fact that she is condemned by society. He thus cannot marry her for his own profit and gain and that is the cause for his furious reaction. Malyn was just an object, a victim, in a patriarchal society that was to be used by males. To her father she was merely an object which her father hoped to gain from in society by marrying her to someone of good lineage and to Aleyn she was just an object to be used in vengeance against her father.

Conclusion

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, female narrators and characters function as a site to explore women's gender roles and patriarchal power structures. Chaucer's depiction of female narrators and characters in the *Canterbury Tales* varies, but all represent and reflect on women and their historical roles in the fourteenth century. Women in Chaucer's time were to be submissive and obedient to men. Chaucer engages with women's status in society, acknowledging how undesirable that position is and constantly reminding his readers of the oppressive situations forced on women. Such repression of women was to ensure their subordination to male authority. The suppressors were mostly the clergy, who used their formal power and influence in society to strip women of power and force them to obedience.

The clergy used their position to defame the female sex. Their slander was based on the knowledge that in the Bible, it was Eve who was guilty of the first sin and then tempted Adam to sin; thus women must be responsible for other sins committed by men.⁴⁶ Women being seen as guilty for the sins of men might be the reason why Aleyn raped Malyn, the daughter of a sinful father. Thus Aleyn used her in his means of vengeance. Malyn like Emelye got caught in a power struggle between males, enacted on her body.

Malyn and Emelye represent women who have no control over their lives, not unlike most women in fourteenth-century society. Most women of that time had no control over their own fate and had little or no opportunity to reject their position in society. Chaucer creates female characters in the *Canterbury Tales* who try to object to the roles inflicted on them by the patriarchal order. Even the faithful and obedient Custance, who represents patriarchy's and the clergy's stereotype of the ideal woman, declares that "Womman are born to thralldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance" (II (B1) 286-287),

⁴⁶ See Salzman 250.

indicating that their situation is not theirs by choice but by inheritance. Her voice can be seen as a critique on the powerless position dealt to women.

However, it is, through the Wife of Bath that Chaucer launches his most forceful perspective on women's oppression. The Wife argues against the patriarchal order and reverses its power structure by taking on the role of a man, where she is the oppressor and the one in control. Male readers in Chaucer's time must have responded negatively to reading about such a woman who dared to treat men as she does. It remains uncertain whether male members of Chaucer's contemporary audience considered the Wife of Bath to mirror male manipulation and oppression of women, appropriating a role of power and authority, normally closed to women. However, she can be seen as a distinct voice of subversion.

The main theme of the *Canterbury Tales* is the relation between men and women. Even though Chaucer, who belongs to a patriarchal society, is a man writing about women, he experiments with the feminine voice, thus relating to them. Because of his familiarity with women's status in his society, he uses his tale to disseminate his knowledge of women's unfair oppression, perhaps hoping to spark a discussion on women's subjugation.

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