

# Portrayal of Women in Deoffrey Chaucer's the Canterbury Tales

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2019

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:764853>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-03-25**



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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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**Portrayal of Women in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and German Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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**September 2019**

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis addresses the question of the representation of women in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the frame of medieval society. With an introductory section on 14th-century society and the treatment of women therein, the thesis examines Chaucer's female characters, both pilgrims and characters in tales, in terms of their personalities, motivations and relationships with other characters. Seeing how the majority of characters deviates from their roles and expected behaviours, the final section explores satirization as a means of calling attention to societal flaws.

**Key words:** representation of women, female characters, expected female behaviour, satire, Geoffrey Chaucer

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## Introduction

The life of Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343 – 1400) can be understood as a string of happy coincidences that led him to becoming the poet and writer recognised as the father of English literature. As a descendant of affluent winemakers and with his father's close connections with the royal court, Chaucer was taken into employment at the court at an early age, where he worked as a squire at first and later on as a diplomat. His proximity to the royalty and nobility offered him an inside look into how they functioned without actually being a member thereof, which would prove to be crucial in the creation of *The Canterbury Tales*, as the interactions with different social groups allowed Chaucer to employ his writing as a subtle instrument of commenting and critiquing the society without restraint. (Jokinen 2017) Moreover, he was well-travelled as part of his service to the king and his travels allowed him to familiarise himself with contemporary European literature, particularly French authors such as Guillaume de Machaut and Eustache Deschamps, as well as Italian authors such as Francesco Petrarca, Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Boccaccio, all of whom proved to be strong influences on Chaucer's authorial creation. (Ferguson 1962: 319-320)

The revolutionary character of *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories written between 1387 and 1400 and set in a frame of a pilgrimage, lies in the fact that, instead of writing in French as the prevailing literary language at that time, Chaucer chose to write in Middle English, allowing *The Canterbury Tales* to be regarded as one of the first works written in English. Moreover, Chaucer shows his mastery of literary genres, language, as well as psychology, by creating numerous different characters who represent “the whole range of English society, lay and clerical, gentle and common, each typical of his trade, order or rank, yet each a distinct, fully rounded personality” (ibid.: 320), and having each of these characters tell a tale, its genre ranging from known religious legends, romances to humorous, yet risqué tales.

This thesis explores female characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, focusing on their characterization and motivation, how they deviate from their typical and expected roles and their portrayal in relation to other characters in the tales. The primary focus is on women who take part in the pilgrimage and tell their stories, however, a chapter will also be dedicated to women who are characters in tales told by other pilgrims. The final part of the thesis addresses the use of satire in portraying female characters and its purpose. The aim of this thesis is to substantiate the hypothesis that Chaucer presents disparate women characters in order to paint a realistic, yet critical picture of the English society at the time and uses satire to point out the flawed nature thereof.

## 1. Medieval society and the conventional role of a woman

Before delving deeper into Chaucer's work and his female characters, an overview of the society at the time is crucial for the understanding of his motivation behind writing this work and of the manner of portraying women.

Having been born in mid-fourteenth century, Chaucer belongs to the late medieval period. This period witnessed disastrous events and significant changes in the English society which affected all its constituents, ranging from peasantry and nobility to the clergy. The existing medieval order began to fall apart as wars raged across Europe, notably the Hundred Years War between England and France, causing a lack of work force. This lack was further exacerbated by the devastating effects of famines and diseases, principally the Black Death, the plague that wiped out a third of the general population of Europe. (Newby 2018) There was widespread discontent among peasants, workers and the nobility which exponentially grew larger, as peasants and workers demanded lower taxes, more rights and better living conditions through violent rebellions, and the nobility started to lose some of its power and wanted it back. (Ferguson 1962: 251-252; 268-269) Even the Church could not avoid being affected by these events, as Ferguson explains:

“The disturbed state of popular religion during this period cannot, however, be accredited in more than a temporary way to the Black Death, though the psychic shock and the death of so many of the most conscientious priests must have aggravated the spiritual ills of the age. This was a period of acute crisis in the history of the Church, during which the fiscal policies of the hierarchy aroused widespread anti-clerical feeling. Heretical or semi-heretical doctrines spread among the lower classes and gave a fanatical driving force to their demands for social justice.” (Ferguson 1962: 264)

As a consequence, many turned their backs on the Church because they felt the behaviour of the clergy was not how it was supposed to be; selling indulgences, interfering in secular affairs, imposing high taxes and greedy and gluttonous behaviour hidden behind a pretext of moral superiority were common occurrences among the clergy. (Heß 2013: 80; 89) However, the

Church was still a major institution within the society and religion remained a vital part of people's lives because of its long-standing tradition.

When it comes to the position and role of a woman in the Middle Ages, it was largely shaped through the influence of the Church and the Bible. With its roots in the story of Eve, the position of a woman is established as inherently inferior and secondary, bearing in mind that Eve was created after Adam. The Church also promoted values such as obedience to man, chastity reticence as ideal womanly qualities, as exemplified in the Virgin Mary, which in turn reinforced their inferiority. (Murray 2006: 284-285) In addition, after Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit, she was branded as disobedient and weak in the face of enticement, which was then used to label all women.

The reality of a woman's life was more often than not unfortunate, as it meant being restricted to the private, domestic sphere and to the roles of a homemaker and mother. It also meant being under the control of men, both financially and legally. As Bennett explains, "women-without-men were seen as lacking the supervision their sex required. Young girls were under the authority of their fathers, adult wives were similarly overseen by their husbands, and widows were often supervised by the provisions of deceased husbands or the presence of inheriting sons." (Bennett 2002: 25) This authority implied giving all control to men, including the control over the property the woman had as dowry for the marriage or obtained while she was married (Howell 2006: 522), as well as the control over financial assets (Mate 2006: 251). Although Howell suggests widows and high-ranking women enjoyed more autonomy (Howell 2006: 522), it was still restricted in many ways and far from what would be considered true independence, as these policies of not letting women control anything in their lives or possessing anything were unquestionably instruments of keeping women within the misogynist frame of subordination.



## **2. Female narrators in *The Canterbury Tales* and their tales**

Out of thirty people who set out on the journey to Canterbury, with the addition of the Canon's Yeoman who joins them later, merely three of them are women: the Prioress, the Second Nun and the Wife of Bath. These three women are introduced in the *General Prologue* and each bears particular importance in Chaucer's work. The Prioress and the Second Nun serve the purpose of being the image of the Church, i.e. of religion, with a slight difference between the two. On the other hand, The Wife of Bath represents the earthly, in addition to being the symbol of female autonomy.

### ***2.1 The Second Nun***

Unlike the Prioress and the Wife of Bath, the Second Nun is merely mentioned in the General Prologue as a companion of the Priestess. Although there is no description of her appearance, behaviour and the like, which might be because Chaucer simply placed slightly less importance on her as opposed to other characters or because he wanted to emphasise that her looks and manners play no role in determining her value as a person and a character, there is nevertheless a lot to be learned about her from her prologue and tale. The Second Nun is the true representation of a woman in a religious order with her pious, morally virtuous behaviour. Her prologue begins with a warning against idleness, i.e. laziness, which is connected to sloth as one of the deadly sins. She also states that laziness leads to being seized by Satan, and in order to avoid that, she will tell her tale. Like the Prioress, the Second Nun also dedicates a part of her prologue to the Virgin Mary by means of a glorifying invocation.

Her tale, a retelling of the legend of St. Cecile, a Christian martyr, is fitting for a nun, considering how it promotes Christianity and Christian virtues, specifically faith, hope and fortitude (Catechism: 444-447). In the story, Cecile is a young maiden who devoted her life to

the dissemination of Christian faith, after converting her husband and his brother to Christianity. Yet, this enraged the Roman prefect Almachius, as it was blasphemous towards Jupiter, the god in which the Romans believed. This led to the killing all who converted to Christianity, including Cecile, who miraculously survived for three days. Yet, despite the pain she was in, she “never ceased to teach them the faith / That she had fostered; to them she did preach” (Chaucer *Nun*: 538-539), in addition to requesting her house to be converted to a church where people could go and worship God, which was followed by her death and canonization. Her tale is noteworthy with regard to the relationship between men and women, in that it depicts a woman who goes against many rules of the medieval code of conduct for women. As Dobbs points out, by preaching her faith, Cecile not only leaves her expected domain, the private, domestic one, and penetrates the public domain usually governed by men, but also takes on the role of a man, as women were not allowed to preach, and thereby shattering boundaries. (Dobbs 2013: 214-215)

## **2.2 *The Prioress***

As opposed to the Second Nun, Chaucer gives a more detailed description of Madam Eglantine, the Prioress, in the *General Prologue*. Described as a woman “Who was very simple and modest in her smiling” (Chaucer *General*: 119) and “of excellent deportment, / And very pleasant, and amiable in demeanor” (ibid.: 137-138), she reflects the general idea of how a nun, especially a high-ranking one, should behave. The Host emphasises her benevolent nature; she cares deeply about animals and “would weep, if she saw a mouse / Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled” (ibid.: 144-145). Moreover, he comments on her courtesy, saying that she puts in a great deal of effort into behaving in a well-mannered way, even when eating.

Madam Eglantine's devotion to her profession is evident in her prologue, wherein she shows her humility and glorifies the Virgin Mary:

“My ability is so weak, Oh blissful Queen,  
To declare thy great worthiness  
That I can not sustain the weight;  
But as a child of twelve months old, or less,  
That can hardly express any word,  
Right so I do, and therefore I pray to you,  
Guide my song that I shall say of you.” (Chaucer *Prioress*: 481-487)

Her tale also seems appropriate for a nun as it deals with the topic of religion, faith and martyrdom and is meant to elicit a compassionate response from the listeners. She tells the story of a seven-year-old Catholic boy living in a Catholic city with a Jewish community. The boy learned a song about the Virgin Mary and sang it every day on his way to and from school, with his route going through the Jewish community. However, he was overheard by Satan who roused the Jews to kill him, as the song was “of such a subject, / Which is against [their] law's (due) reverence” (ibid.: 563-564). The Jews attempted murder, but the boy miraculously survived and even continued to sing the very song that almost got him killed, with the miracle being accredited to the Virgin Mary.

### ***2.3 The Wife of Bath***

Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, is certainly the most controversial and most debated of all Chaucer's characters. Described as somewhat deaf (Chaucer *General*: 446), with a bold, fair and reddish face (ibid.: 458), gaps between her teeth (ibid.: 468) and large hips (ibid.: 472), her presence counters the one of the Prioress, seeing how Chaucer readily points out her flaws. He does the same with her personality, pointing out her need for being the centre of attention even

when attending mass and her ostentatious outfits. This, however, helps achieve a higher degree of her character's authenticity, making her more realistic and easier to identify with. Nevertheless, Chaucer remarks on her virtues as well, such as her skills in sewing: "She had such a skill in cloth-making / She surpassed them of Ypres and of Ghent." (ibid.: 447-448)

The prologue to her tale resembles an autobiography, in that Alisoun uses it to recount her life and experiences, mostly in her marriages. Right at the beginning she states that she was married five times; she is aware that this practice is frowned upon and feels the need to defend herself and does so by giving examples of men who have done the same. She mentions biblical figures like King Solomon, Abraham and Jacob, all of whom had numerous wives, so as to justify her own behaviour. Alisoun vigorously advocates gender equality by criticising double standards between men and women whereby she "takes on the misogynist expositors of the Bible and beats them at their own game". (Rigby 1996: 140) In fact, her monologue about marriage, love and sex for the most part seems to consist of references to the Bible and other scholarly sources, which she cleverly twists and turns so it fits her agenda and proves her point:

"I know as well as you, it is no doubt,  
The apostle, when he speaks of maidenhood,  
He said that he had no precept concerning it.  
Men may advise a woman to be one,  
But advice is no commandment.  
He left it to our own judgment;  
For had God commanded maidenhood,  
Then had he damned marriage along with the act (of procreation).  
And certainly, if there were no seed sown,  
Then from what should virginity grow?" (Chaucer *Wife of Bath*: 63-72)

Apart from being well-read, which is evident from how she effortlessly discusses the Bible and cites scholars such as Ptolemy, Alisoun comes across as a practical and worldly-wise woman in which she takes great pride. Her views on marriage and sex are shockingly open and liberal;

at a time when virginity and maidenhood are praised and even expected, her sexual prowess and genuine enjoyment in sexual activities is uncommon and certainly refreshing. What is more, instead of regarding marriage primarily as a holy bond between a man and a woman, she sees it merely as a road towards her financial wellbeing, which is the main factor in achieving her ultimate desire for autonomy. The only reason her first three husbands were good is because they were rich and old, which meant they would soon die and leave the money and land to her. In marriage, which Alisoun deems to be a business, she uses the power of her sexuality as her main weapon. She has no problem withholding sex if she does not have it her own way and defends it in a very pragmatic manner:

“A wise woman will be constantly busy  
To get their love, yes, when she has none.  
But since I had them wholly in my hand,  
And since they had me given all their land,  
Why should I take care to please them,  
Unless it were for my profit and my pleasure?” (ibid.: 209-214)

Her attitude towards marriage is reflected in her name as well. Instead of naming her Seamstress after her profession, as he did with all other characters, Chaucer deliberately named her the Wife of Bath, demonstrating that Alisoun regards wifedom as her primary occupation and source of income.

All the same, Alisoun is not merely a two-dimensional character, but a woman of many complexities and even more contradictions. Unlike her previous marriages in which she easily subdued her husbands and got what she wanted from them through lies and manipulation, her marriage with Jankyn proved to be a challenge because, apart from being a threat to her autonomy seeing that “he would not allow me anything of my desires” (ibid. 633), Jankyn is indomitable and readily fights back when things are not how he wants them to be. This is evident from their conflict over Jankyn’s favourite pastime; the sole purpose of reading “this

book of wicked wives” (ibid.: 685), which is a misogynist collection of tales about deceptive, lascivious and maritidal women, is to make Alisoun angry out of spite and enjoyment. Yet, no matter how turbulent their relationship was, with their conflict escalating into physical violence, Alisoun still declared that

“He could win back my love straightway.  
I believe I loved him best, because he  
Was of his love standoffish to me.  
We women have, if I shall not lie,  
In this matter a curious fantasy:  
Note that whatever thing we may not easily have,  
We will cry all day and crave for it.  
Forbid us a thing, and we desire it;” (ibid.: 512-519)

Furthermore, Alisoun repeatedly contradicts herself while gaining autonomy and achieving mastery over her husbands. She is overtly against misogynistic stereotypes about women reinforced by the texts she has read and exemplified in Jankyn’s book, stereotypes that describe women as vulnerable, irrational, dishonest and deceptive, yet she sees no issue in using those same stereotypes to her advantage. She lies to her husbands, manipulates them and uses their weaknesses against them. Hansen argues that, by doing so, “the Wife both consciously and unconsciously endorses the antifeminist stereotypes she cites” (Hansen 1992: 32), and while it may seem so, her actions might be an alternative approach to an otherwise binary problem of dealing with stereotypes. As a wise woman, Alisoun knows how men perceive women and that men see stereotypical female traits as flaws, all the while knowing that she cannot change their mind. Yet, she sees these very traits as advantages, so instead of fitting or shattering these stereotypes, she makes them work in her favour.

Alisoun’s tale reflects her to the point of the hag being seen as her alter ego, considering how she bears a strong resemblance to Alisoun. The tale is a portrayal of the loathly lady

archetype, a common literary motif of “a woman who at first appears as a hideous crone or hag [and] requests a kiss or promise of marriage from a man, and when he agrees to it she transforms into a beautiful young woman” (Dresker 2013: 1). The hag in the story saved the life of a knight who raped a young maiden, for which he was sentenced to death, but would be spared on condition that he found out what women really wanted. She offered him a deal; she would give him the answer, but only if he obeyed her wish, to which he agreed. She then fulfilled her part of the deal, the answer being that “Women desire to have sovereignty / As well over her husband as her love, / And to be in mastery above him” (Chaucer *Wife of Bath*: 1038-1040), and in return he had to marry her. But the knight was so repulsed by the hag that he could not bear being in bed with her, even though she saved his life, to which the hag responded with giving him a choice. From the male perspective, the knight was faced with an impossible choice; either he chooses the loyal and obedient, but physically unattractive wife, or the young and beautiful, but possibly adulterous one. So instead of making the choice himself, he let the hag choose for him, thereby granting her the autonomy she desired, and she chose to be the ideal wife, one who is young and beautiful as well as loyal.

### 3 Female characters in individual tales

Apart from being narrators of tales, many women have found their way into other pilgrims' tales as characters. In terms of their roles, they can be classified into three groups. On one side of the spectrum are the ideal women and wives who are to be seen as role models for all women to look up to, but it is important to note that this idealness refers exclusively to male conceptions thereof, not universal ones. The idealness is embodied in the characters of Custance from the *Man of Law's Tale* and Grisilda from the *Clerk's Tale*. The following description of Custance is applicable to the whole category of these women:

In her is great beauty, without pride,  
Youth, without immaturity or folly;  
In all her deeds virtue is her guide;  
Humility has slain in her all tyranny.  
She is mirror of all courtesy;  
Her heart is a true chamber of holiness,  
Her hand, minister of generosity in giving alms. (Chaucer *Man of Law*: 162-168)

Custance, the daughter of the emperor of Rome, is arranged to be married to the Sultan of Syria and despite not wanting to leave home, she was a compliant girl and determined to see the plan through. What followed was a series of calamities and tests of her faith; from the murder of her groom orchestrated by his mother, the malice of the knight who framed her for murder because she rejected him to the tyranny of her second mother-in-law who was ready to kill her grandchild out of malice. Nevertheless, Custance stoically withstood all hardships, showing that salvation lies in piety, for she sought help from God through prayers in all her misfortunes, as well as in virtuousness, seen in her reaction to the knight's death; even though he mistreated her, "Custance had for his death great pity" (ibid.: 689) What is more, even her name reflects her personality; Custance, as an older form of the name Constance, means constancy or



steadfastness, which are virtues Custance maintained when facing hardships, particularly her steadfastness of faith.

However, the above-mentioned description of ideal women does not do them justice, as it is a list of traits others benefit from, not them and hence does not represent their true roles. Their reality is far more unfavourable, at least from their point of view, since it entails a life of passivity and unquestioning obedience to men. Custance does not have a say in her own life; she was supposed to comply with the wishes and commands of others without question, namely her father, even if it meant leaving her family and friends, only to be married off to an unknown man. Strikingly, she is so accustomed to women being treated as inferiors that she genuinely believes it is true: “Women are born to servitude and suffering, / And to be under man's governance.” (ibid.: 286-287) As a result, she willingly submits herself to the will and mercy of others and so becomes “a passive nothing subject to the whims of a Christian patriarchy” (Robertson 2006: 126)

Similarly, Grisilda's fate is not in her hands, but governed by her father and later her husband. Her marriage to the high-ranking marquis Walter was also arranged, with her father unquestioningly handing her off to him as if she were a commodity, and not his child. And when Walter asked her if she agreed to the marriage, his wording can be understood as foreshadowing of their forthcoming marriage:

“I say this: are you ready (to submit) with good heart  
To all my desires, and that I freely may,  
As seems best to me, make you laugh or feel pain,  
And you never to grouch about it, at any time?  
And also when I say `yes,' say not `nay,'  
Neither by word nor frowning countenance?  
Swear this, and here I swear our alliance.” (Chaucer *Clerk*: 351-357)

His question soon became a reality, as he had a maniacal obsession with putting Grisilda to the test to see whether she was indeed loyal and obedient as she promised. His deranged tests consisted of the faux murder of their two children and later their faux divorce and marriage to his daughter whom he presented as his new wife. Strangely, Grisilda passed all of his tests because she completely submitted herself to him, she did everything he asked without objecting or complaining and voluntarily put herself in an inferior position. By doing so, she became the ideal wife and woman from the male perspective, but in reality was a “passive victim of a brutal patriarchal economy” (Robertson 2006: 126)

The middle ground is occupied by objectified women such as Emelye from the *Knight's Tale* and partly Alison from the *Miller's Tale*. These women are primarily objects of desire for the male characters, whose presence seems to have no particular value in itself, but rather only in relation to men. The role of Emelye, queen Ypolita's sister, is principally as one of the parties in a distorted love triangle. Described as young, beautiful and “fairer to be seen / Than is the lily upon its green stalk, / And fresher than the May with new flowers / For her hue vied with color of the rose” (Chaucer *Knight*: 1035-1038), she quickly drew the attention of two prisoners being held in the castle, Palamon and Arcite. A competition between the two ensued, with Emelye, whom neither of them has ever met, being the object to be claimed. Even when they got out of prison, their obsession with Emelye had grown to the point where they both came back to win her over, as if she were a prize and not a person. However, considering how they have never met her, their competition over her has nothing to do with love, it is evidently about power and supremacy. The tournament that followed further reinforces the fact that Emelye has a background role in her own life; instead of holding the power over her own life, her fate is decided by the outcome of the tournament. Ironically, her prayer to the goddess Diana indicates that she has no desire to marry either one of them:

“Chaste goddess, well knowest thou that I

Desire to be a maiden all my life,  
Nor never will I be no lover nor wife.  
I am, thou knowest, yet of thy company,  
A maiden, and love hunting and the chase,  
And to walk in the wild woods,  
And not to be a wife and be with child.  
I do not desire to know company of man" (ibid.: 2304-2311)

Similarly, Alison finds herself in a love triangle as well, but takes on a more active role in it. As a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl, she unsurprisingly caught the eye of two local scholars, Nicholas and Absolon. But unlike Emelye, Alison was already married at the time, yet she still happily engaged in an extramarital affair. The beginning of their affair is a confirmation of Alison's objectification:

"For clerks are very subtle and very clever;  
And intimately he caught her by her crotch,  
And said, "Indeed, unless I have my will,  
For secret love of thee, sweetheart, I die."  
And held her hard by the thigh,  
And said, "Sweetheart, love me immediately  
Or I will die, so save me God!" (Chaucer *Miller*: 3275-3281)

By resorting to manipulation and overt physical aggression towards Alison, Nicholas reduces Alison to the role of a toy he can play with whenever he pleases. Absolon is no different; although Alison rejected him, he will not take no for an answer and does not stop making advances to her, suggesting that he has no respect towards her. Their situation further escalated to a tug-of-war in which Alison's practical joke enraged Absolon to the point where he was ready to physically harm her in retaliation. As was the case with Palamon and Arcite, the competition between the two men is more about their own sexual satisfaction than it is about Alison per se, and so Alison becomes merely an instrument in the game between them.

On the other side of the spectrum are the wicked wives, May from the *Merchant's Tale* and Alison from the *Miller's Tale*, who are the embodiment of the misogynist stereotypes found in Jankyn's book. These women are by definition young, attractive and married to rich older men, so as to confirm another stereotype that women are, for lack of a better word, gold diggers who marry solely for money and property. Furthermore, there is heavy emphasis on their sexuality in lieu of a development of their character and psychology, which is influenced by the stereotype that women are weak and cannot resist their inherent urges and desires. This is, for instance, visible in the manner in which Alison is described: with a graceful and slender body as a weasel (ibid.: 3234), skittish as a coal (ibid.: 3263) who could skip and play like a calf following its mother (ibid.: 3259-3260), Alison is compared to an animal, alluding to her carnal nature. And since women are weak and lascivious, those who are married to older men, like Alison and May, are usually adulterous and prone to seeking sexual pleasure in the embrace of younger men who could keep up with their unquenchable desire.

Their volatility also lies in their tendency to lie and cheat, which the Host confirms in the *Epilogue to the Merchant's Tale*: "Lo, what tricks and craftiness / Are in women! For always as busy as bees / Are they, us innocent men to deceive, / And from the truth ever will they deviate" (Chaucer *Merchant*: 2421-2424) Such was the case with May, who was having an affair with Damian behind her husband January's back. January was old and blind, which May shrewdly used in her favour when one day she asked for a pear from a tree in their garden, knowing he will not be able to get her one because he cannot see, so he let her climb the tree where Damian was already waiting for her. The two had intercourse right in front of her oblivious husband, and even after he regained his eyesight and saw them, May used her wicked trickery to convince him that what he saw was wrong because his eyes were deceiving him and that she was actually trying to give him his eyesight back, in addition to saying later that his eyesight might deceive him again, suggesting other affairs. Alison's deception, plotted with

the help of her lover Nicholas, was more elaborate and involved convincing her naïve husband John into thinking that a flood is coming and that he should take preventative measures to save them by hoisting tubs up on the ceiling so that when the flood came, they would float in them and survive. But while he was sleeping in one of the tubs, Alison was in their bed with Nicholas. And after the scheme unravelled, with John believing the flood is indeed coming, cutting the ropes holding the tub and crashing to the floor, which drew the attention of the whole town, Alison shrewdly convinced these people that the idea of the flood was in fact John's, turning him into an object of ridicule and the laughing stock of the whole town, all the while saving her face and keeping her affair secret.

#### 4 Characterization with a satirical twist

While Chaucer's writing seems to be merely a reflection of medieval society, it is for the most part a critique thereof, hidden under layers of humour and false morality, and as such an excellent example of satire. Defined as

“the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual [...] or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even [...] the entire human race” (Abrams and Harpham 320),

satire is primarily meant to scoff at people or institutions, which is detectable in almost all of Chaucer's characters.

Although the Prioress' behaviour seemingly corresponds to the expected behaviour of women in religious orders, there is subtle satirization in all of her actions. For instance, her impeccable table manners and excessive preoccupation with keeping her clothes clean, along with the fact that “she took pains to imitate the manners / Of court, and to be dignified in behavior, / And to be considered worthy of reverence” (Chaucer *General*: 139-141), suggest narcissistic tendencies. She is more focused on the earthly and keeping up the appearance of a noblewoman, instead of focusing on the spiritual as would be expected of a nun and appropriate for one. Moreover, her tale, although Christian on the surface, hides a great deal of anti-Semitism and describes Jews as the “cursed folk” (Chaucer *Prioress*: 574) who engage in financially immoral activities and are prone to violence. Through the Prioress, Chaucer voices his criticism towards the corrupted hypocritical clergy, which was sinful but simultaneously moralistic, telling others how they should behave without practising what they preach.

Satire aimed at the Church can also be seen in the figure of the Wife of Bath. While trying to justify her attitude towards marriage by citing the Bible, she attacks the manner in which the

Bible is misinterpreted and in turn misused by men who use it to control women, but ironically, she does the same to defend herself. What is more, Chaucer simultaneously turns the Wife of Bath into an object of satire in the way she handles misogyny and stereotypes. He creates a strong, independent woman in a male-dominated society, but her portrayal is pushed to the point of grotesque, evident in her relationship with Jankyn. She despised his book because of its crooked portrayal of women as a result of being written by men:

“For trust well, it is an impossibility  
That any clerk will speak good of women,  
Unless it be of holy saints' lives,  
Nor of any other woman in any way.  
Who painted the lion, tell me who?  
By God, if women had written stories,  
As clerks have within their studies,  
They would have written of men more wickedness  
Than all the male sex could set right.” (Chaucer *Wife of Bath*: 688-696)

However, her actions speak against her, as she treats all her husbands with disdain, manipulates them and even throws the first punch in her argument with Jankyn, after which she deceptively turned herself into the victim. In doing so, Alisoun becomes the embodiment of the very stereotypes she challenges, and, as Rigby points out,

“Thus, in the figure of the Wife of Bath, Chaucer did not just personify the faults ascribed to women by contemporary preachers but neither did he simply negate them by having her refute such accusations. Instead, for satirical literary purposes, he negated this negation by having her personify such faults in the very act of refuting them, producing a defence of women which was intended to be read ironically so as implicitly to undermine the very position it explicitly expounds.” (Rigby 1996: 150)

Her tale has elements of satire as well. The moral of the story ought to be that physical beauty is not supposed to be the most important thing in life and that true beauty lies within. Yet, after the hag gains autonomy and mastery over the knight, she turns into a young beautiful girl after all, wherein Chaucer places beauty over personality. In addition, more irony lies in

her alleged autonomy; by giving the knight exactly what all men want, “the heroine relinquishes her power and dissolves into literal silence and alleged submission, the archetypal feminine transformation.” (Hansen 1992: 33)

Even the ideal wives were not spared the satirization. By being robbed of any sort of control, Custance and Grisilda were essentially robbed of their identities and became merely instruments in the hands of other authority figures. Custance withstood all challenges life threw her way, but did so in a passive and unquestioning manner. The satirization of Grisilda goes even further in that it depicts a woman so passive and so submissive that she willingly lets her children to be murdered as proof of her obedience, making it borderline grotesque. By depicting these women in this manner, Chaucer does not present them as exemplars of idealness, but efficiently turns them into warnings against blind obedience.

*The Merchant’s Tale* and *The Miller’s Tale* are teeming with humour and light-hearted innocuous ridicule of gullibility and falling prey to one’s own lust, particularly aimed at the old husbands. John from the *Miller’s Tale* knowingly marries above his own station, and despite his jealous efforts to control her, he foolishly falls for Nicholas’ and Alison’s scheme. Similarly, January falls prey to May and his gullibility is ridiculed to the point where he trusts his wife’s words and manipulations more than his own two eyes.



## Conclusion

*The Canterbury Tales*, considered as Chaucer's magnum opus, is in many ways rightfully a masterpiece. Chaucer created highly individualized female characters, all of which represent a window into the medieval society, offering insights into how women were perceived and treated by the rest of society as well as how they behaved and in certain cases challenged misperceptions and mistreatment. In doing this, Chaucer seemingly contradicts himself; he created the Second Nun and the Prioress as the true images of the Church, thereby celebrating and supporting its upright values, but he also created the unruly Wife of Bath as a celebration of sexual freedom. The five women chosen from the tales represent the spectrum of a woman's value as seen by men, with ideal women on one side, women like Custance and Grisilda who are obedient, loyal and submitted to men in every way, the wicked women on the opposite side, women like Alison and May who are deceptive, adulterous and unruly, and with Emelye occupying the middle ground as neither ideal nor wicked, but merely as an object of male desire.

Not only did Chaucer manage to grasp the essence of the contemporary English society on all levels and transfer it into a literary piece, but he also subtly incorporated a critique of the society of which nobody was spared. He criticised the flawed ways of the clergy, which distanced itself from the spiritual and morally upright and instead paid more attention to the worldly, along with criticising the flawed nature of mankind by emphasizing superficiality, gullibility and hypocrisy as its common faults. However, his most biting critique seems to be of the treatment of women and their position in society; with the Wife of Bath's struggle for autonomy comically undermined by her own doing and with Grisilda's passivity pushed to the border of grotesque, Chaucer shows his awareness of the unfair position of women and draws the attention to the need of its improvement.

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