

Women in The Canterbury Tales

Yuting Zhang

School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, 401331, China

Abstract: Known as the “father of English poetry”, Geoffrey Chaucer vividly depicts the abundance and colorfulness of social life in 14th century in his masterpiece work, *The Canterbury Tales*. In its a large number of stories, different images of women in that age are presented. Starting from a different perspective, this thesis approaches the story in the light of feminism. By giving women their own discourse, or describing their living circumstances, Chaucer shows the entrapment of middle age women in an authentic way. Nevertheless what the social statuses women are, they are classified as the supplement of men. Women suffer a lot of oppression from religion to gender, in the society at that time, they rarely have the right to voice for themselves and have limited opportunity to improve their depth of thought. Therefore, they have no way but to be angle or temptress. In this way a great realistic spirit is embodied in Chaucer’s work that transcends time.

Keywords: The Canterbury Tales; Feminism; Geoffrey Chaucer.

1. Introduction

As one of the greatest literature works in England, *The Canterbury Tales* is deemed as an encyclopedia opus that epitomizes the achievement of Middle English literature and paves the way for the further development of English traditional literature. It is the story of 30 pilgrims who meet by chance at an inn in London, and journey together to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. During the travel, the host require each pilgrim to tell four stories on the way back and there to pass the time along the way, so there should be a total of about 120 tales. However, the author fails to carry out this plan and the book consists of only 23 complete tales and fragments. According to stories which are told in different perspectives, a big picture about Medieval realistic society can be seen. The pilgrims described in the book come from all level of the society including scholars, merchant, knight, monk, miller, farmer and housewife and their stories are in different genres, such as knight legend, hagiography, sermon, fables and so on. *The Canterbury Tales* reflects British society in the beginning of capitalism, exposing the corruption of churches and the hypocrisy of priests, condemning Asceticism that stifle human nature and affirming secular love life. *The Canterbury Tales*, far more than contemporary British literary works, is the first example of realism in the history of British literature.

Chaucer’s works embodies a firm sense of order. In the Middle Age, society was constituted of three estates of men: the clergy fostered the spiritual well-being of the state, a warrior-aristocracy defended both Church and people, and the third estate supported the other two by the fruits of its labor. Therefore, he subtly arranges the sequences of storytellers according to their estate. The Knight is naturally placed first, followed by his son the Squire and by his attendant Yeoman. The knight is duly succeeded by representatives of the Church: the fastidious Prioress with an accompanying Nun, personal chaplain, and three other priests; the Monk who holds the office of outrider in his monastery and the equally worldly and mercenary Friar. The third estate is represented by a greater variety of figures, rich, middling, and poor, beginning with a somewhat shifty Merchant, a bookish Oxford Clerk, a Sergeant of the Law, and a Franklin. Chaucer depicts downwards socially to the urban guildsmen, including

Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer and Tapicer, to the skilled tradesmen, like Cook, Shipman, Doctor of Physic, and to a well-off widow with a trade of her own. Chaucer relegates Parson, Ploughman, Manciple, and reprobates to the end of his troupe, especially he modestly includes himself, a high-ranking royal official, at the end of the list. It is with this last group that he a contrasting paragons of virtue with those whose very calling prompts periodic falls from grace. We can see that the Reeve strikes fear into his master’s tenants while feathering his own nest, the Miller steals corn and overcharges his clients, the lecherous Summoner makes a parade of his limited learning and the Pardoner trades profitably in patently false relics.

2. Analysis of Women in *The Canterbury Tales*

Even though we can get to know the time where Chaucer used to live from these stories, women in *The Canterbury Tales* could be divided in two groups: Angle or Temptress.

2.1. Image of Angle

In the Middle Age, women are greatly influenced by the medieval tradition that men have some privilege. Following the dominant ideology, ethnocentrism, men demand that women must keep chaste, while men themselves are naturally attracted by other women with the ignorance of her own marriage, and men are right to have affairs with other women besides his wife, even rape women. The patriarchal society takes it for granted that men are superior to women and believes that there is no need for change because it is a natural phenomenon. According to Genesis, God formed man from the dust of the ground, and named him Adam, and then he took one of Adam’s ribs and made it into a woman-Eve. Under this situation, women are subordinate to men. Commonly women in the Middle age are in two comparative states: waiting to be some men’s wife despite they never knows about before, or already being ones’ wife, especially they need to treat their husband as their lord. Meanwhile, whether a woman is good or not is greatly under the man-made evaluation system in which the highest praise for a woman is that she is morally faithful to her husband or will-be husband as much as she is faithful to the God. She is vulnerable,

because she makes great effort to guard her virtue for her husband; she is gentle, because she listens to her husband patiently; and she is smart, because she can provide useful advice for her lord. If she behaves well, she is the Angle in men's eyes, if not, the Temptress. In the Bible story, it is the woman who is beguiled by the serpent and gives the forbidden fruit to the man. Therefore, women are more likely to make mistakes and they need to be ruled by their husband. Even the beauty of women is viewed as sexual object and men are easily seduced by it, just like Adam is easily cheated by Eve when the world begins. Men are actually incompetent and unlucky, they attributes these bad things to women, claiming women are evil. Although there is no reason or evidence, it is an assertion that men are in charge of women and women should be tame to men.

In this way, Angle is actually the aesthetic ideal of men. They presume what angelic women should be and men sometimes objectify women as the missionary tool of a religious ideology dominated by the male. These two features, submissive to man's presumption and enthusiastic to missionary work, are embodied in the knight's Tale and in the Man of Law's Tale. In the former one, the storyteller uses many words to emphasize the striking beauty of Emelye, the heroine. She is portrayed as "fessher than the May with floures newe, for with the rose colour stroof hir hewe". It is her beautiful face that two prisoners swiftly fall in love with her as soon as they see her. Palamon and Arcite who are of royal blood of Thebes lose their sight of freedom, revenge and power and begin to blame each other by accusing of ratting, because they think the another one is a betrayer by loving the same woman. Arcite even feels grieved when he is released to his country, and he is unthinkable back to Athens by pretending as a servant waiting for the opportunity to approach Emelye. However, her beauty is only a symbol of rarity which indicates the power of a man who possessing her. As the younger sister of queen Hippolyta, her marriage is arranged by the King, Theseus, who is the supreme lord and governor of Athens. Theseus glorifies the fight between Palamon and Arcite in the name of love and is willing to host the stage for them. He even asserts that the one who win the fight will marry Emelye. Although Emelye don't want to anyone, she has to obey the decision of Theseus, being the spoil of the combat between two men she never meets and knows about. Her crying for the death of Arcite is viewed as the due benevolent characteristic of an angelic woman. She finally marry to Palamon, accepting her fate as being someone's wife, just because Theseus think Palamon has already suffered from the lovesick for Emelye for many years. At the end of the story, it is said they two live happily together. "Emelye him loveth so tendrely and he serveth so tendrely" and "That nevere was her no word hem bitwene". However, is fighting for a woman really a good way to love her? Is there a real woman who can always do what the man want her do in a good manner? Can an angelic woman really live a happy life with her lord?

In the Man of Law's Tale, the heroine, Custaunce is the representation of perfect. She is the daughter of Rome emperor, and she is "to rekene as wel hir goodness as neautee, nas nevere switch another as is she". Many people praise her as "In hire is heigh beautee withoute pride, Yuthe, withouten grenehede or folye; To alle hir werkes vertu is hir gide; Humblesse hath slain inhir al tyrannye. She is mirour or alle curteisye; Hir herte is verray chambre of holinesse, Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse." While in the story, all of her

good qualities can be conflated to one character, that is, her consistency in obeying the will of the God. When she know that she is going to a strange land with paganism, she does not opt out. In the Genesis, it is said to women that your desire will be for your husband, but he will be your master. So "housbondes been alle goode and han been yoore" in Custaunce's mind. She also believe that "I wrecche womman, no fors though I spille" and she firmly believe women are born to thraldom and penance and to be under man's governance. Even though she later is persecuted and deported from places to places, it is her constant preying to God that she can finally survive from a terrifying storm at sea, especially she is impotent to control a ship. And it is her firm believing to God that she can get food from the sea for 3 years. She is blessed by God, and she is the embodiment of God's power. When she is libeled on murdering, God will voice for her and punish the real murderer. People are strongly affected by the Christian spirit shown by her. Sowdan of the Surrye is captivated by her, and he is even glad to convert to Christianity and ask his vassal to be baptized and christened just in want of marrying her. After she bumps and floats on the sea to Northumberland, the constable and his wife who take in her convert their faith because their love to this angle. The King Alla is also kind to her and then change his belief to marry her because of his sympathy to her misfortune. And when we looking back this story, we can find that all her grief and pain is caused by pagans and it is always kings' mothers who get in the way. Both queens are killed in the end, because their behaviors are viewed as betrayal to their lords-- their sons. They are evil for their different religious beliefs and disobedient self-assertion.

2.2. Image of Temptress

Sourness is just one of the characteristics of being a temptress, another egregious point is that these women pretend to be innocent and kind and so many poor men will be cheated by their deliberate disguise. In the Merchant's tale, a beautiful and young lady May must marry to a 60-year-old man January whose demand of wife is being a good object of his sexual desire. He believe that "womman is for mannes hepl ywrought" Even though he epitomizes men's tendencies that treat women as their properties and tool, he still think his wife must be faithful to him and want her to give birth to a baby for him. In his mind, "wif i mannes help and his comfort, his aeadis terrestre and his disport. So buxom and so vertuous is she, They mose nedes libe in unitee." He pay for his wife, therefore May should take the responsibility to please him. She should feed his sexual desire physically, and resign herself entirely to his will. "Al that hir housbnde lust, hir liketh wel. She seyth nat ones nay whan he seyth ye." When he is blind, he is too afraid to lose his property, so he always controls her and even hopes someone kill them. Due to this "deep love" for his wife, there is a contrast between January and May. May is a corrupt and degrading woman who commits adultery with another man and does not perform her duty to her husband, while January is a poor man wiling by his wife and spending all his money with no due return.

Another typical temptress in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Wife of Bath. She is with a concrete personal image: riding a tall horse, wearing a heavy wide-brimmed hat and wearing a pair of sharp shoes. Different from all the heroine we discussed above, the Wife of Bath has her own way of speaking. She is not depicted by man, but directly has the opportunity to voice by herself. In her words, we can see the

unique wisdom from female perspective and what is the real picture of a woman without man's distortion. Firstly she queries the necessity of keeping chastity. Being virgins is just an advice for girls rather than the commandment. It is not true that being chaste means a superior state. Women have their choices and freedom. "To wedde me, if that my make die, withoute excepcioun of bgamy". The Wife of Bath makes a completely new interpretation of Christian dogma which also highly concerns about sensuality. She points out that "counseling" and commandment in theology have different meanings with different moral standards. That is to say, commandment is a ban on avoiding evil and is binding on anyone, while counseling is a piece of advice on how to accumulate righteousness. Then, she thinks that wife owes her husband nothing, both of them should pay out. For example, she needs a husband to pay her debt, that is the premise of her marriage. "Min housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe, Whan tat him list com forth and paye his dette" But she does not think she is entirely controlled by her husband. She is just his wife and she is the one who has power to control his body. "A housbonde wol I have, I wol nat latte, Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral And have his tribulacioun withal, Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wif. I have the power during al my lif, Upon his propre body, and nat he." The Wife of Bath also believes that a couple should have the right to decide to do their sexuality as they wish, so she can generously use her "instrument" as God generously gives her sexual organ. She is actually faithful to herself. Finally, she also has the dominant right in dominating the family. Her husbands originally want to dominate her for granted, and they take out women's virtues to restrain her. But the Wife of Bath does not give in and defies their opposition. Her husbands are finally defeated, and give her the dominance. She tries her best to ingratiate her husbands just for her fun or interest. And she proudly praises women's wisdom in lies and deceits and glorifies them for great courage. She encourages women to express themselves and dare to use their words as weapons to win some profits for themselves. She believes the tears and lies are inherent gifts of women. "For al swich wit is yeven us in oure birthe; Deceite, weping, spinning, God hath yeve, To wommen kindly, whil they may live." She speaks out the truth of a temptress, that is, women with own conscience are unwilling to their marriages. In this way, we

can see that the Wife of Bath is the representation of humanist spirit: human is godly, that human is able to find truth goodness and beauty. The Wife of Bath also calls for women's freedom in thinking, praises women's worldly aspiration, and tries to break the feudalistic control and man's dominance.

3. Conclusion

However, the Wife of Bath is interrupted many times when she is talking, just like the fact that women always oppressed. She is also suffering from the domestic violence from her husbands. So, we can see that women in *The Canterbury Tales* suffers a lot of oppression from religion to gender, in the society at that time, they rarely have the right to voice for themselves and have limited opportunity to improve their depth of thought. Therefore, they have no way but to be angry or temptress.

References

- [1] Chris, Beasley. What is Feminism? [M]. New York: Sage, 1999.
- [2] Carolyn Dinshaw. Chaucer's Sexual Poetics [M]. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.
- [3] Elisabeta Zelinka. Anti-feminism in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* [J]. Gender studies, 12(1), 2013.
- [4] Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales* [M]. London: Penguin Group, 2005.
- [5] Liu Qiaoping. Humanism spirit in *The Canterbury Tales* [J]. Cultural Journal, 2019.
- [6] Meng Guanglin. Feudal monarchy in early medieval England and Christian society [J]. Historical Research, 2000(2).
- [7] Ouyang Meihe & Wang Chuanju. On the Development of Female Cultural Subjective Status in British Literature [J]. Jiangxi Social Sciences, 2006(04).
- [8] Peter Brown. A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture [M]. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.
- [9] Tan Nian. The Female Interpretation of Mrs. Bath in *Canterbury Stories* [J]. Film Review, 2007(05).
- [10] Wang Huan. Chaucer's Ambivalent Attitude towards Women in *The Canterbury Tales*. [D]. Chongqing Normal University, 2018.