

THE DOGS IN CHAUCER'S WORKS

by

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INTRODUCTION

The field which I have chosen is the woman in Chaucer's works. The Globe edition of the works of Chaucer was used for all quotations and references. The notes to the Ghest edition were also used. Omitted from the study were: "Recount of the Ness" because it is a translation; "Boethius de Consolatione Philosophias", a translation of a philosophical work; "Treatise on the Astrolabe", a scientific treatise; and most of the minor poems such as "The House of Fame" and others.

The women treated were taken from the following: "The Death of Blanche the Duchess", "The Complaynte of Fair Aneliën and False Arrete", "The Parliament of Fowles", "Troilus and Criseyde", "The Legende of Good Women", and "The Canterbury Tales." As a background for this study, the England of the fourteenth century has been depicted.

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I

THE ENGLAND IN WHICH THE WOMEN OF CHAUCER'S POEMS LIVED

England in the age of Chaucer, more than five hundred years ago, was a nation just passing out of mediævalism and coming to the threshold of the modern world. Much of the crudeness of manners and talk remained. In fact there was very little of the refinement of modern life. Progress of society was slow during the fifteenth century in both England and France for both countries engaged in either mutual hostility or in desolating civil wars which checked the spirit of improvement. Professor French states that it was natural enough that poets, prophets, and common men, who had to shape their lives amid the new raw forces, should feel that the nation had seen its best days. Moralists saw in the disasters the hands of an avenging God, venting his anger on a sinful people while others saw the order of cause and effect reversed, tracing abuses to direct causes in the tragic events which they had witnessed. However, all alike manifested a tendency to date the corruption of society from the reversal of fortune which had come so unexpectedly upon England in the middle of the century.

In the earlier years of the fourteenth century, English

supremacy on land and on sea seemed certain. The year 1346 marked the victory of the yeoman on the field of Crecy. This was soon followed by the defeat of the Scotch at Neville's Cross, and ten years later the Black Prince won another brilliant victory over the French near Poitiers. Here, along with much rich booty, the French king himself was taken prisoner. Such victories as these quickened the national consciousness at home and brought to birth that new thing which we now call "patriotism." But this military glory departed as suddenly as it had come; for England hardly possessed the power to maintain her position of supremacy. The wealth of the land was not great enough to maintain large forces under arms on the continent. Later expeditions into France by the Earl of Pembroke in 1372 and John of Gaunt in 1373 were wastings of English lives and money. In the meantime, France had formed an alliance with Spain and the combined fleets of these two nations disputed with England her doubtful supremacy in the Channel. As towns along the coast were sacked by landing parties, England felt the bitterness of the invasion and in 1386, a panic spread through England as tales were passed about of the greatness of the forces gathering across the Channel. This blow was averted by events in Flanders, which occupied the attention

of the French but the threat in a vivid way revealed the change which had taken place in the military situation.

Occurring in the same century as the misfortunes of war was the pestilence, the Black Death, which spread all over Europe and came at last to England. The loss of life in its first visitation was appalling and it returned three times in the course of the century. It has been estimated that one half the population of England was swept away in these epidemics. The effects to the country could not help but be disastrous. The loss in human life produced an inevitable loss in wealth. There was a shortage of labor to care for the cattle and the fields. Wages that were double or even treble those paid before the visitation of the disease were demanded of the barons due to the accompanying decline in the value of money. The king tried to enforce repressive measures to meet the situation but a spirit of independence was being fostered in the peasants. No longer did they feel the bonds of the strong tie which bound man to the land on which they had always lived. Restlessness and discontent spread rapidly culminating in the outbreak of 1381. King Richard II shrewdly controlled and met several of the attacks in the Peasant's Revolt. For three days London was held in a reign of terror which could have been quieted on-

cept for such men as Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, and John Ball. Such uprisings reflect the instability of society in the fourteenth century.

The growth of commerce and manufacture, together with the large booty captured abroad had brought increased wealth to England but its uneven division created class jealousy and strife. Signs of personal extravagance were seen in the desire for sumptuous fare and costly dress and furniture.¹

The houses of this period were crude wooden structures, often times containing large cracks or openings. But the worst discomfort of the house to the modern mind was the want of privacy. There was generally but one bedroom; for most of the household, the house meant simply the hall. The floor of the hall was paved with tiles or flagstones. The wall was frequently adorned with paintings, in common houses rude and ornamental while in others of a better class they represented histories, scenes from romances and religious subjects. Chaucer frequently speaks of the decorated wall.

Tables were boards upon trestles. Over this a table cloth was spread and the ornamental vessel was probably the salt-cellar which was a very important article at the feast.

1. French, R. D. A Chaucer Handbook, pages 1-67

Fishes seldom appear on the table in dinner courses.² It was the custom for two to eat from each "trencher", a flat piece of bread or wood. Meat was cut into strips so that it could be picked up and dipped into gravy or sauce. In the previous century forks were certainly known but were not common. The iron fork of princess Joan's inventory in 1367 was probably a kitchen implement. Gaveston, the extravagant favorite of Edward II, had one but it was used solely for eating pears.³ For eating, people carried their own knives with them in a sheath attached to the girdle. However, the hands were used for conveying food to the mouth, for it was considered bad manners to carry the victuals to the mouth with the knife or to pick the teeth with the knife at the table. Greediness in eating was one of the prevailing customs of this age.⁴

There was also in Edward III's reign a renewed interest in the fashions, since both men and women labored to outdo one another in making themselves conspicuous for the oddity of their attire and their extravagance in display. The gowns were long and capacious in size and the unnece-

2. Wright, Thomas, A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England during the Middle Ages.

3. Jenks, Tudor, In the Days of Chaucer.

4. Wright, Thomas, A History of Domestic Manners.

oery amount of stuff that was used in ladies' robes rendered them always obnoxious to the satirists of the period. The outer sleeve, scalloped, nicked or slipped into fancy edges, hung loosely midway from the elbow to the wrist and displayed an undergarment with close fitting sleeves which were sometimes trimmed with buttons. Encircling the waist, there was sometimes a decorated girdle to which a small purse to contain alms was attached, for ladies of distinction and wealth distributed money or food to the poor and the purse was used as a receptacle for alms rather than for the preservation of money. The head was swathed in a kerchief or hood that fell over the shoulders. In speaking of the head dress of the Wife of Bath Chaucer says:

"Her coverchiefs ful fyne were of ground;
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound
That on a Sonday were upon her head." 5

The statement of its weighing ten pounds is a playful exaggeration but it does express the size of the head dress. Only the face was left exposed for, covering the neck, was a wimple or gorget which was used by nuns and elderly ladies. Sister Madelova, in speaking of the wimple says, "The well-pinched wimple is one of the most interesting details of the dress. It is of white linen, accordion

5. Prologue to Canterbury Tales Lines 453-55.

plaited or "pinched" to fit closely around the neck and over the shoulders in such manner that each plait formed a circle and the whole wimple is a series of concentric circles."⁶ Shoes were generally worn reaching to the ankles and were later to be fastened to the knee by gold chains. The toes were long and pointed and sometimes slightly ornamented.

The Elismere manuscript shows the wife of Bath on horseback and helps the reader not only to get the picture but to see the character revealed. Chaucer, although interested in dress, realizes that the story is the thing.

Attention was also given to the hair, eyebrows, and painting of the face in that day. Yellow hair was considered beautiful and saffron was used to dye it. One old tale relates the story of a knight who was inquiring of a hermit how his wife fared in the other world. He was told that she was held by the hair of her head so that she could not move while needles were thrust once a day into her brain through the holes where she had plucked the hair from her brows and forehead to make herself fairer to please the world. Her face also was inflamed with burning pitch, oil, and lead but she well deserved the punishment for when she was alive

6. Sister Medeleve, "Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays."

she adorned and painted her visage to please the sight of the world. Little have we realized that the modern custom of eye brow plucking and painting extended back as far as Chaucer's time.

These are just a few of the customs and manners that may aid in picturing the England in which the women in Chaucer's works lived.

II

THE WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S WORKS THAT HAVE BEEN TREATED IN THIS STUDY

Many interesting groupings of Chaucer's characters have been made by scholars in the field. For the purpose of this study, I have decided to divide the characters studied into three groups: first, those that Chaucer connected more or less with the courtly love convention; secondly, those that represent the great mass of women; and thirdly, those that were especially under the influence of the Church.

1. Those Connected More or Less with the Courtly Love Convention

The women in Chaucer's works which are more or less connected with courtly love conventions give us some of the most artistic portraits in literature. To understand this

setting, it is necessary to consider the system of courtly love. Its origin was in southern France and as early as the eleventh century there existed in several small courts a society in which women was supposed to hold the supreme place and in which under her influence, vast importance was attached to social etiquette and decorum. Definite rules governed the sexes in all their relations and especially in matters of love which had become an art to be practised rather than a passion to be felt. Naturally, the literature which drew its inspiration from such love was devoid of spontaneity and real feeling and through imitation became stereotyped.

The book of Andreas, an old guide book, furnishes us a ready means of understanding the abstract principles and laws underlying the courtly system. First, courtly love is sensual. Love was a passion arising from contemplation of beauty in the opposite sex and culminated in the gratification of the physical desire awakened.

Second, courtly love is illicit and, for the most part adulterous. Marriage was no sufficient excuse for denying a lover's petition.

Third, a love that is sensual and illicit must consequently be secret. Nothing was so despicable as revealing secrets that should be kept after receiving favors, and a

person disclosing secrets was considered a traitor to the god of Love. Because of the need of secrecy, lovers were always furtive and eluded the public places. There was a constant fear of spies, yet the revelation of spies was necessary for stories. Fear of slander disturbed the mind of many women. Chaucer, describing the violation of Incontinence, tells us:

"Thise Remynne wyfes loveden so hir name
At thilke tyme, and dredden so the shame,
That, what for fere of skilendre, and drede of dothe,
She lost attenes bothe wytte and brothe;
And in a sough she lay, and wane so ded,"

The women of that society felt it necessary to protect their good name, for a sullied reputation was unbearable.

Another reason for secrecy may be found in the peculiar relations between husband and wife among the higher classes of society. Rarely was marriage a matter in which the heart was concerned. Business and political considerations brought about unions in which no love could exist. In order to obtain power, wealth, land, or social position, marriages were performed regardless of great discrepancies in age or desires. Yet exclusive rights pertaining to the married state seem to have been insisted upon by the husband. The story told by the merchant in the *Canterbury Tales* is an

1. Legend of Good Women, 1612-1616.

example of great divergence in age; for January, sixty years of age, marries May, twenty years old, so that he may have heirs and the pleasures of a young wife. On the other hand, the story of patient Griselda as told by the clerk of Oxford cites an example of a marquis marrying the daughter of a poor farmer, for his subjects were demanding that he choose a wife.

Fourth, love to meet the requirements of the courtly system, must not be too easily obtained. It was a high and great virtue to be strived for and its attainment ennobled those who strove for it. In theory love, was the fount and origin of every good. It made the rude and uncouth excel in every grace; it caused men to be gallant and teaches every one to abound in good manners. The good was all on the lady's side and it was to achieve these better qualities that the lover sought his lady's favor. No more grievous fault could be committed than for a lover, man or woman, to be unfaithful, for constancy was of the utmost importance. If the element of sensualism in courtly love could be disregarded, the ideals of the system were high. It incited the lover to spectacular deeds, and demanded of him nobility of character and moderation in all acts.

Courtly love was supposed to produce definite effects

which Professor Neilson aptly calls "symptoms". Sleeplessness became a requirement imposed upon lovers; confusion, loss of speech; trembling and pallor when, in the loved one's presence; fear to make an avowal to the lady; and dread of detection by others were also symptoms that were common. The lover was described as actually suffering. Medieval lovers were also an extraordinary¹¹⁷ lachrymose lot. Lamenting and tears were conspicuous in their conduct while swoons were certain to occur under any unusual stress.

In medieval love poetry, a number of conventional devices were used so frequently that they became characteristic of love poems. For example, many erotic poems were cast in the form of dreams or visions probably in imitation of the apocalyptic writings of the church. Poems of this class commonly tell the story of a hero in the service of love. In keeping with an old and lasting association between love and the season of the year, the events usually occur in the spring when "a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love." Allegorical figures abound, exhibiting various phases of love or the virtues and faults of lovers. And Chaucer follows the conventions of the time by using the love vision style in the following poems:

The Book of the Duchess, House of Fame, Parliament of Fowls, and the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women.²

G. G. Coulton in his book, "Chaucer and his England", when speaking of Chaucer's treatment of love says,

"No one poet represents that love so fully as Chaucer in both its aspects, I say in both, and not in all, for such love as lent itself to picturesque treatment had then practically only two aspects, the most ideal and the most material. The maiden whose purity of heart and freedom of manners are equally natural was not only non-existent at that stage of society, but inconceivable."³

The lady as represented in the romances and the courtly love stories was perfect in all her attributes and held in high esteem by her lover. Her good qualities were doubtless exaggerated, however, since the poet was often politically her subject as well as her lover. Her perfection is pictured in her physical beauty, her character, and her influence upon others. In beauty, she portrayed the medieval ideal. Her hair is blond or golden, her eyes beautiful; her complexion fresh and clear; her mouth rosy and smiling. Courtesy, kindness, and refinement were outstanding in her character. In fact, all that makes the perfect woman in manner, the poet's love possesses. Her influence on others

2. Dodd, W. G. Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower.

3. Coulton, G. G. Chaucer and His England, pp. 222.

is always enabling and her goodness affects all who come near her, making them better. As such a perfect being the lady occupies a position of exalted superiority in respect to her lover. He becomes her devoted vassal and submits himself wholly to her desires. His love for her surpasses all the other things in value, and even the slightest token from her makes him rich.⁴

A presentation of the courtly love system has already been given. The story, *Cressida*, is an outstanding example of the following of its principles. There are several other works that make abundant use of these conventional ideas. The *Book of the Duchess* is among the earliest. The perfection of the lady, both physical and spiritual, her position of superiority, her indifference to her lover are all told in the conventional way. Every good quality of mind and heart is attributed by the knight in black to his lady. In a like manner the "*Parlement of Foules*" is a tale of love in which eagles take the roles of lovers and heroine. To them are given human and conventional qualities. The formal eagle, endowed with every virtue, is the sovereign when her suitors serve. She, heedless of their pleas, refuses to choose a mate for another year, leaving them to grieve and pine. Another animal tale with a love element is that of *Percelete and Chanticleer*, a hen and rooster in *Chaucer's* *Canterbury Tales*. Courtly Love in Chaucer and Cowper.

the fable of the Sun's Priest. Chanticleer is one that struts, a possessor of egotism and personal vanity. This is the trait that leads him to his downfall when the fox flatters him and his remarkable voice. Dame Pertelote becomes the typical housewife, kindly, solicitous of her husband's welfare, even though she may reproach him for his faint heart. She possesses the personal characteristics of a courtly lady, for she is courteous, discreet, and debonnaire. Furthermore she is one who possesses much wisdom and is capable of discoursing with her husband. To Chanticleer, she explains how dreams are caused by one of four humours, each producing a very different type of dream. It is an effect arising from gluttony or improper eating, consequently she recommends a cure of garden herbs that will purge him. After this discussion is ended, Chanticleer meets his inevitable fate, that of being caught by the fox, but he craftily releases himself by getting his captor to speak to his pursuers. Thus we have a tale in which, although the characters are animals, there is presented a conventional lady. But the most interesting use of conventional ideas is found in the words of Pertelote, in which she tells Chanticleer what kind of a husband a woman likes:

"I kan not love a coward, by my feith!
 For certes, what so any woman seith,
 We alle desiren, if it myghte bee,
 To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,
 And seeres, and no mygard, no no fool,
 No hym that is agast of every tool,
 No noon avunter, by that God above!
 Now dorate ye seyn, for shame, unto your love
 That any thyng myghte make you aford!
 Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd!"⁵

Professor Dodd states that these were the qualities demanded of courtly lovers from the time of Andreas on.⁶

Chaucer, in his treatment of Criseyde, presents her from the angle of the code of courtly love. Professor Dodd states that our opinion should not be formed entirely on the basis of present-day ideas. To Chaucer, Troilus and his lady were contemporary young people, and their love affair is related in terms of contemporary life. Since they belong to the appropriate rank in society, they are treated as courtly lovers. The courtly elements which appear in the poem agree with the principles of courtly love that have already been discussed.

The story relates how Criseyde, the daughter of Calchas, left in Troy while her father returned to the Greek camp, loves the handsome knight Troilus, son of Priam. Given back to the Greeks, she forgets Troilus, who is later

5. *House of Freeste's Tale*, l. 4100-4109.

6. Dodd, W. G., *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*, p. 247.

claim, and grants her affections to Diomedes. There is also in the story Pandarus, the uncle of Cressida and the friend of Troilus. This man of more mature years acts somewhat as a go-between among the young lovers, often scheming, planning secret meetings for the lovers, and reassuring Troilus when he despairs of gaining the favor of Cressida.

That phase of courtly love most prominent in the Troilus is perhaps the doctrine of secrecy, due, of course, to the nature of the love treated in the poem. In that love which was in essence sensual the demand for secrecy was a real one. Much was done under the cover of night or in the dwelling of the uncle.

"But gode brother, do now as thee oughte
For goddes love, and keep hir out of blame;
Sin thou art wys, and save alwey hir name." 7

Other courtly love principles expressed were that love is not only good in itself but is the cause and origin of all good, and love obtained too easily is not prized. Most of these doctrines were put into the mouth of Pandarus. He reminds Cressida of the importance of constancy; for if a woman pretend to love a man and calls him "loof" and "dere herte", and at the same time loves another,

7. Beck iii, l. 36-41.

"She doth herself a shame, and him a gyle." 8

The sorrow of Troilus was the poet's primary theme as stated in the first few lines of the work.

"The double sorow of Troilus to tellen
That was the king Priamus sone of Troye
In lovings, how his adventures fallen
Fro we to wale, and after out of joye
My purpos is..... 9

He exhibits the usual symptoms of a courtly lover for he loses sleep and his appetite, and becomes pale and wan.

"And fro this forth the sorfe him love hir sleep,
And made his mete his foo; and eek his sorwe
Can multiplie, that whos toke heep,
It shewed in his hewe, both eve and morwe." 10

He also feigns sickness in the first meeting at the house of Deiphobus. To her he is a vassal and willingly serves her.

"Yey, nay, but ever in can he fresh and grene
To serve and love his dore hertes quene,
And thanke it is a guerdoun hir to serve
A thousand-fold more than he can deserve." 11

In his lady's presence he becomes confused and forgetful and fears to tell his lady of his woe. These symptoms should not lead us in any way to believe that Troilus was not a strong, valiant warrior but a weakling that was easily swayed. Under the system of courtly love, although abso-

8. Book III, l. 111.
9. Book I, l. 1-6.
10. Book I, l. 70-74.
11. Book I, l. 113-117.

lately fearless elsewhere, he should tremble in the presence of his lady. Chaucer intended for his hero to be worthy of the spirited Criseyde and, as such, to have our sympathies.

The heroine is also typical of the lady in the meshes of courtly love. Her crime does not consist of her yielding to Troilus but in her unfaithfulness to him.

"But trewely, the story telleth us,
 That made never women more wo
 Than she, when that she falsed Troilus.
 She seyde, Alas! for now is alone ago
 My name of treuthe in love, for evermo!
 For I have falsed oon the gentileste
 That ever was, and oon the worthiest!" 12

Professor Dodd says that all evidence seems to point to the fact that the heroine knew from the outset that this amour meant ultimately a full and complete yielding to the passions of Troilus. Chaucer was careful to have her a widow for then she would not be as innocent as an unmarried woman. She is cool-headed and has the ability of looking facts in the face. Chaucer has shown us the innermost workings of her mind in spite of the danger of our forming unfavorable opinions because we knew her private thoughts. They were perfectly natural and legitimate for her to have but the expression of them may be daring.

In character, Criccyde is *severe*, but not sentimental. This is indicated by the manner in which she considers and weighs every question. She is self-possessed and cool-headed under fire, so to speak. Furthermore, she has a quick wit which she puts to work against her crafty opponent. She has kept in mind her own interests in the matter and when she enters this compact she does so with open eyes.

Professor Dodd further states that had circumstances permitted her to remain in Troy she would have been faithful to Troilus, but since it is necessary for her to depart, she realizes that the happy life in the city is a closed chapter. Then, true to her nature, she decides to act in accordance with what she considers her best interests and her happiness. She had done so when she gave her love to Troilus. She does so now when she gives her love to Diomedes. In the first instance she did nothing wrong according to the code, but her sin was falseness in love and it was this which caused her remorse.¹³

Into the mouth of the franklin, Chaucer puts a tale based on an old Breton lay. These lays differed from other types of medieval literature, such as the *fabliau*, in being exclusively intended for the chivalric classes, declares

13. Dodd. *Courtly Love*, pp. 129-200.

Professor Schofield.¹⁴ The chief beauty of the Franklin's tale resides in the noble spirit which pervades this picture of married love. In those days, it was a common belief that when marriage came in, love flew out of the window but the case of Dorigen is a refutation of this argument.

Dorigen, a charming woman of high birth, earnestly pledges unwavering fidelity and devotion to her husband, Arverigne. While he is overseas in England she is so lonely and downcast that she can not think of being merry. A glance at the rolling sea reminded her of ships and her husband whom she feared would be ship wrecked on the treacherous black rocks below, Aurelius, an ardent squire begs her to grant him her love, else he shall die. To rid herself of him and yet remain in his good favor, she promises to do as he requests on the condition that he perform the impossible task of removing all the rocks from the rough coast. He, with the aid of a magician, produces an illusion whereby the stones apparently have vanished. Thereupon he seeks the fulfilment of her promise. Dorigen, in great distress, relates the circumstances to her returned husband who with a high sense of honor, bids her keep her plodge.

14. Schofield, W. E. English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer, p. 100.

When Aurelius hears this, the magnanimity of Arveragus and his wife so impresses him that he frees Derigen of her obligation and returns her, joyous, to her husband. In turn, the magician upon hearing the story, releases Aurelius from the paying of the sum of money he owed. The tale ends, leaving this question for debate:

"Which is the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?"¹⁵

"Fre" in this instance means liberal or generous.

Ten Brink says of the poem:

"The contagious influence of good, proceeding from a common as well as from a noble disposition, and the wondrous power of love, are beautifully symbolized in this fable. And throughout all his story Chaucer gives special prominence to the idea by which the whole receives its internal completion, viz., the idea that love and force mutually exclude each other, while patience and forbearance belong to the very essence of love." ¹⁶

"The Legend of Good Women," Professor French states, makes use of the conventional device of the dream and at once suggests the influence of "The Romance of the Rose." In fact, the entire prologue is written in the spirit of this poem. Not only are we brought into the ideal spring-time landscape but also it concludes by representing the author himself before the bar of a court of love. The

15. Franklin's Tale 1.1022.

16. Root, Robert K. The Poetry of Chaucer, p. 275.

charge brought against him is that he, the poet, had failed in the principal function to glorify love and to sing the praise of women. He had strayed in writing of Criseyde and in translating Jean de Meun's "Romance of the Rose."

As the servant to the god of love he is to show women true in loving all her life and the wicked men who have proved false to her. The finished work was to have consisted of the prologue followed by the legends of the nineteen ladies who form Alcectis's train, and concluded with the story of Alcectis herself. However, this large task seems to have grown wearisome to Chaucer before the telling was half completed. He wrote only nine legends, praising the virtue of noble ladies. All of the illustrations are of classical origin. Possibly the first three are of the greatest importance.

Cleopatra

One of the best written legends of the group is that of the martyr queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. To Antony she had given herself in marriage. He was a Roman senator who had falsely left the sister of Caesar and was so in love that,

"Him thoughte ther was nothing to him so due
As Cleopatras fer to love and serve." 17.

He was only too glad to be able to fight on the sea, but he was put to flight. Over his defeat, Antony became discouraged and fell upon his sword. Cleopatra, constant in her love, had a shrine made of rubies and fine stones. In it she placed the body of Antony. For herself, she had dug adjoining the shrine a pit into which she put many deadly serpents. Thus she with a brave heart

"Inon the neddres gonne hir for to styng,
And she hir deeth recovereth with good chere,
For love of Antony that was hir so dore." 18

Professor Root states that the highly animated account of the sea fight is a fine bit of description. 19 Nevertheless, it does not help us to visualize Cleopatra. Nor does Chaucer show us any of her faults. His portrayal is that of self denial and suffering. She becomes a martyr of cupid.

Thise

Professor Root states that perhaps the legend of Thise comes nearest to being real poetry. The tale is one of young lovers on neighboring estates that were separated by a stone wall. To Piramus and Tesbe, the son and the daughter of the respective lords, the wall was most undesirable because

18. Legend of Good Women, l. 699-701.

19. Root, P. E., Poetry of Chaucer, p. 180.

it separated them. They had found a narrow crack through which they could talk. Since their parents would not consent to their marriage, they arranged a secret meeting outside of the estates. Teshe, arriving at the wall first, remained until a fierce lion approached. In hastening to seek refuge in a near by cave, her wimple was lost but she did not try to recover it. The lion, after leaving the wall, tears it to pieces. Not long after this Piramus arrives but, finding only the torn wimple, decides that Teshe has been killed by the lion. He regrets that he ever arranged such a meeting. In sorrow, he mortally wounds himself, but, before he dies, Teshe reaches his side. She rather than part from him, turns the sword upon herself too,

"But God forbode but a woman han
 Ben also trewe and lovyng as a man."

Dido

The story of Dido is one taken from Virgil but changed to some extent. Eneas was compelled to flee from his country and lands in Lybye after passing through a storm and suffering a great loss. In Carthage, he beholds Dido, the flower of all queens, "of gentleness, of freedom, of beauty." After hearing his story, she tells of her sorrow that he should have met with such misfortune. She is willing to aid him in recovering his ships because she has for

him a great love. One clear morning she and her company, along with Æneas, mounted on beautiful horses, are overtaken by a severe storm. Dido fled into a small cave in which Æneas had also sought shelter. She, touched with pity for him, took him as her husband for the remainder of her life. But Æneas prepared to steal away from the country by night in spite of pleas from Dido. She fell at his feet and begged for him to slay her but Æneas left her in woe and pain to wed Lavinia. After Æneas has departed, Dido, rather than live without him, has a fire for sacrifice built and when it was burning brightly she cast herself upon it, at the same time mortally wounding herself with the sword of Æneas. She leaves a letter to Æneas in which she complains of her state and closes it with these words:

"For thilke wynde that blew your ship away,
The same wynde hath blowe away your fay." 80

The story is one containing much pathos. Dido is so completely in love with Æneas that she mourns and sorrows when he is out of her sight.

The other legends he treated in a like manner were: Hypsipyle and Medea, victims of Jason's treachery; Lucretia; Ariadne; Philomela, the victim of Tereus; Phyllis who slew

herself for love of Demophan; and Hypoclestia who accepted death at her father's hands rather than treacherously kill her husband. If the work had been completed, the twentieth would have been Queen Alceste who gave up her own life to save her husband's. As the poem now stands, the only description of her is in the prologue. She accompanies the god of love and places the penance on the author. To Chaucer, she was a goddess of beauty for she was dressed like unto his favorite flower. According to the first version of the prologue, an adornment of gold she had upon her head and upon that a white crown with many white flowers made of fine oriental pearls. Her dress was all embroidered with green. Against the sloping landscape of springtime, she resembled a pure white daisy with its center of gold, the emblem of perfect wifehood. It is believed that she is a glorified Anne of Bohemia and her young husband, Richard II, is the god of love.

Another faithful woman from one of Chaucer's early minor poems is the heroine in "The Complainte of Faire Anelida and False Arcite." It, too, was a poem that was never finished. However, we get a picture of Anelida, the Queen of Ruency who was fairer "then is the same shene."

To her none could compare.

"And for to speken of her stidfastnesse,
She passed both Penelope and Lucrece,
And shortly, yf she shal be comprehended,
In her no myghte nothing been amended." 21

To her lover she was ever true, always grieving when he was out of sight. Lest he suspect her in any matter, she always told him all of the truth, never giving him reason to doubt her. During his absence she wept and swooned. But Arcite took no regard of her steadfastness. He became attracted by another lady "proud and newe" to whom he gave his love and devotion. She grieved many a day.

"But when she saw that hir no get no goyn,
Upon a day, ful sorwfully wepyng,
She caste hir for to make a compleynynge;
And with her owne hand she gan hit wryte,
And sente it to her Theban knyght Arcite." 22

In it she pleads for his return and tells of her grief and sorrow. But we cannot tell the outcome for the tale remains unfinished.

21. Fair Amelida and False Arcite, l. 31-35.

22. Fair Amelida and False Arcite, l. 306-310.

2. Those That Represent the Great Mass of Women

Those that represent the great mass of women Chaucer portrays as vividly as the group just discussed. Their lives were monotonous. They were doubly bound to the household and the spinning-wheel or embroidery frame, with scarcely any interruptions but the morning Mass and gossip with a few neighbors. The spinning wheel was a necessary implement in every household from the palace to the cottage and the work embraced all the various processes in the manufacture of linen and cloth, as well as the making it up into articles of dress. One comment made of this time is, "Whilst the women are thus engaged the one who knows most reads to them, the others listen attentively and do not sleep as they do at mass."²³

The young daughters, even of great families, were brought up not only strictly but even tyrannically by their mothers who kept them constantly at work, exacted from them almost slavish respect, and counted on their earnings. Among other lessons, the young ladies were taught to be very demure and formal in their behavior. While walking on the street, the eyes should be lowered and fixed on the ground

23. Bateson, Mary. Medieval England.

a distance of four fathoms directly in front without looking or glancing sideways at either man nor woman nor looking upwards. They were cautioned against being too forward in falling in love, too eager in dancing, talking scandal, believing in dreams, drinking too much wine, and being too talkative at the table. They were to avoid idleness, to respect the aged, to refrain from being quarrelsome. A kiss in public was the usual form of salutation but she was never to allow herself to be kissed in secret. Whatever may have been the effect of such training on the better educated classes, the general character of the women of the middle and lower classes appears to have been not very conducive to domestic happiness. All the popular materials for social history represent their morals as being very low, and their tempers as overbearing and quarrelsome. The consequence was a separation of domestic life between husband and wife after marriage, the husband seeking his amusement away from the house and the wife assembling with her "gossips," often at the public tavern, to drink and amuse herself. The conversation of these "gossips" when they met was loose and coarse in the extreme.²⁴

24. Wright, Thomas, A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiment.

At this age there was also a prevalence of wife-beating, sister-beating and daughter-beating. Justification was found on almost the first page of the scriptures. If God had meant woman for a position of superiority, he would have taken her from Adam's head rather than from his side. Therefore, woman was always held in subjection to man's will. Yet in every generation, moralists noted with pain the gradual emancipation of ladies from restraint which had always been excessive.²⁵

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some of the more elegant female accomplishments, which were unknown in the earlier ages, were coming into vogue. Dancing was a more favorite amusement than ever. Music was also more extensively cultivated and it was a more common thing to meet with ladies who indulged in literary pursuits. Sometimes, too, the ladies practiced drawing and painting.

Out of doors, the garden continued to be the favorite resort of the ladies. As yet travel was not very safe. Comfortable, easy riding carriages were very seldom used. Traveling was done on horse back or on foot. The roads were extremely insecure, the country being infested by such numerous bands of robbers that it was necessary to travel 25. Coulton, G. G. Chaucer and His England, p. 215.

in considerable companies and well armed.⁸⁶

One of the real curses of mediæval home life was the system of child marriages. At an indecently early age children were bound for life to partners whom they had likely never seen. The immaturity of the parents could not fail to tell often upon the children. The church did, indeed, refuse to recognise the bond of marriage if contracted before both parties were seven; and she further forbade the making of such contracts until the age of twelve for the girl and fifteen for the boy.⁸⁷ The Wife of Bath is one of Chaucer's characters who at an early age entered into a marriage contract.

In the well-to-do houses, girls very seldom had much to say regarding marriages. The parents often chose the husband for political, social, or pecuniary reasons. Until marriage, the daughter was the property of the father; after marriage she was solely the possession of her husband.

A great favorite with Chaucer was the Wife of Bath, perhaps the character he believed he had drawn the best. He refers to her in his "Envoy to Bakton" advising his friends to read of her.

86. Wright, Thomas, *History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments*.

87. Coulton, G. G., *Chaucer's England*, p. 204.

"The wyf of Bath I pray you that ye rede
 Of this matere that we have on hande.
 God graunte you your lyf frely to lede
 In fredom; for ful hard is to be bond." 29

In appearance, she was rather extreme. Her cover-chiefs were large and, as was stated earlier, Chaucer ridicules them by saying in a sincere tone of voice,

"I dorste swere they weyden ten pound." 30

The wimple was around her shoulders while on her head was a hat that was as broad as a buckler or a shield. To keep her gown clean, she wore over it a foot mantel or riding petticoat. Her new soft shoes with spurs attached were worn over scarlet red hose that were straightly tied. Just as distinctive as her gaudy dress was the fact that she was gat-toothed, or had teeth widely spaced, and that she was somewhat deaf, which was a pity. Nor were her features attractive for they were bold and red of hue.

Nevertheless, she seems to have been a good business woman for "Of clooth-making she hadde swiche an haunt, she passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt." 31 which regions were celebrated for cloth making. In one thing she demanded precedence and that was in the presentation of offerings which were taken from the people instead of money. It is

29. *Louvay De Chaucer*, A Dutton, 11 29-32.

30. *Prologue*, 1.454.

31. *Prologue to Canterbury Tales*, 1.449-450.

not definitely known whether this was the offerings of some guild in which she held a high place or solely a parish ceremony, but regardless of the occasion, the dear Wyf of Bath must lead the procession or she loses her good humor and charity toward all.

The favorite pastime of the Wife seems to have been travel, consequently she is frequently found on pilgrimages. She had visited the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem no less than three times and, as a year was the time necessary for this trip, no one but a lover of travel would have undertaken it. She had also worshipped at shrines in Rome, Boulogne, Galicia and Cologne. Every detail of the Wife's character, her gaudy dress, her loud voice, her humorous and indelicate speech shows that she went on pilgrimages not primarily for religious reasons but for their social advantages.

Love and marriage were subjects on which the Wife of Bath thought herself very well informed. We find her incessantly talking until her prologue is almost longer than that of any other pilgrim and certainly it is wittier than most. The theme is marriage and her mouth speaks from the abundance of her heart and experience for:

"Housbondes at chirehe- dore she hadde fyve,
Withouten other compaigne in yowthe;" 31

Here was a marriage at an early age nor did she fail to provide herself promptly with a new husband after one was gone. And now,

"Welcom the sixte, when that ever he shal
For sothe I wal not keep no chaast in al." 32

Throughout she was in defense of marriage, occasionally quoting Bible scripture in her arguments, for did not God bid us to wax and multiply? That was one text she could easily understand. God had created differences in people, to some he had given one gift, to others, another. But this woman believed she was not made to be a virgin. She proceeds to elaborate on her husbands.

"I shal seye sooth, of housbondes that I hadde,
As thre of hem were goode and twe were badde." 33

Her choosing of a husband, as might be expected, was rather haphazard and governed by her momentary desires. She states.

"Ive loved never by no discrecion,
But ever felwed myn appetit,-
Al were he short, or long or blak, or whit;
I took no hope, so that he liked me,
How poore, he was, no cok of what degree." 34

After marriage, she was always the monarch of the household,

31. Prologue to Canterbury Tales, 1.460-461.

32. Prologue to Tale of Wife of Bath, 1.45-46.

33. Prologue to Wife of Bath's Tale, 1.196-197.

34. Prologue to Wife of Bath's Tale, 1.688-689.

chiding constantly until the husbands greatly rejoiced when they heard a kind word. Nor did she care to be governed outside of the home for she says,

"We love no man that taketh kepe, or charge
Wher that we goon; we wil ben at our large." 35

Not much is told of her three good husbands but we can imagine them as rather meek and mild, somewhat of the hen-pecked variety. The fourth husband was a revelour who had a penchant. She punished him through his jealous nature. Her last husband was a well read man, once a clerk of Oxford. In age, he was twenty while she was double that or forty. But her ire was aroused when she found him reading from a book on wicked wives. She snatched three pages from it and a fistie combat ensued after which she gained control of the house, land, his tongue, and hand. The book was immediately destroyed, therefore their home life was peaceful ever after.

And yet there is somewhat a plaintive and sorrowful note when she says,

"But, Lord Crist! when that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikketh me aboute syn herte rectei
Unto this day it dooth syn herete boote
That I have had my world, as in my tyme.
But Age, alas! that al wole envengyn
Hath me birafte my beautee and my pith,-
Let go, fare wel, the devel go therwith!" 36

35. Prologue to Wife of Bath's Tale, l.301-302.
36. Prologue to Wife of Bath's Tale, l.400-408.

The tale told by the Wife is in full accord with her doctrine of desire for power. A young man to save his life is sent in quest of the answer to the question "What thing is it that women most desire?"³⁷ On his journey, he meets an old hag who supplies the answer, but in recompense he must concede to her desires. To him, she is most repulsive but, as the fairy tale goes, the first kiss he gives her after the marriage ceremony transforms her into a beautiful maiden. The answer that he took with him to the court was that possession of power was what women desire most. How fitting that the Wife of Bath who always insisted upon power, tell this tale.

For the age in which the Wife of Bath lived, the prologue to her story was a most revolutionary document according to Professor Lounsbury. It embodies the protest of human nature against the doctrine that made single life purer and nobler than the wedded. Her boldness can not be fully realized unless we bear in mind that the doctrine of celibacy that she attacked was the doctrine accepted. In its favor was both the teaching and the practice of the church. Paul, the great apostle to the gentiles, and several of the most revered of the early fathers had laid down

³⁷. Wife of Bath's Tale, l.906.

with positiveness the doctrine of the superior sanctity of celibacy. Indeed, the wedded person who lived a Christian life, fought the fight, and kept the faith, would receive the promised crown; but it would be only a second-rate crown in comparison with that of the one who had for religious reasons avoided matrimony. For instance, Tertullian characterizes married women as those of the second degree of modesty who had fallen into wedlock.

St. Jerome, another strong advocate of celibacy, would have been astounded if he could have foreseen the wit which Chaucer employed in turning the arguments or assertions in his treatise into ridicule. Chaucer scarcely disguised his contempt for the doctrine. The confounding of celibacy with chastity excites his scorn.

Chaucer himself or any serious character could not have put forth these sentiments. It was not accident that led to the selection of the speaker. It was only in the mouth of one like the sensual, shrewd, and worldly Wife of Bath who boasts five husbands and will accept the sixth, that an attack on celibacy could be safely placed. From a character like hers the curt and disdainful denials of accepted statements is tolerated.³⁰

30. Lounsbury, T. F., *Studies in Chaucer*, Vol. II, p. 382-87.

The character of the Wife of Bath is a great creation. One admired her vitality and possession of power in that day when women were in thralldom. Here is a reckless gaiety and a profound knowledge of human nature.

Professor Jasseraud has very charmingly portrayed her in one sentence: "One must perforce keep silence when the Wife of Bath begins to talk, irresistible gossip, chubby faced, over-fed, over-bussing, inexhaustible in speech, never failing in arguments, full of glee."³⁹

Lounsbury remarks that the clerk of Oxford's tale is perhaps the best example of the method that Chaucer follows in handling a tale in a poetic manner even though the events are not true to life. The heroine, Griselda, throughout is a representative of patience but it is not the kind of patience which is consistent with human life. She was the virtuous and beautiful daughter of a poor farmer but she is married to a rich and mighty Marquis. She felt humble and unworthy of such a husband and promised to him in those words obedience at all times,

"But as ye wole yourself, right as wol I,
And here I swear that never willingly
In werk, ne thought, I syl yow disobeie,
For to be good, though me were looth to deynt" 40

39. Jasseraud, J. J., *A Literary History of the English People*, p. 224.

40. Clerk of Oxford's Tale, 1.361-364.

She remains faithful to this oath to the most extreme point, even to having her children snatched from her because her husband requested it. Since she never expected to see them again she kissed them and lulled them, then requested that they be buried away from the haunts of wild animals that may devour them. She is also willing to concede her position to a new charming girl who seems to have won her husband's affections. Tucker Brock of Yale remarks that there is something in human nature that makes man want to stick pins in a human pin cushion. The story ends well; however, for the charming girl is her daughter, her son, too, is returned and she resumes her position and finds herself high in her husband's affections, although he tested her loyalty in so many severe and heartless ways.

The clerk very emphatically announces that the moral of this tale is constancy.

"This storie is seyde, not for that wyves sholde
 Felowen Griselde as in hemylytes,
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,
 But for that every wight in his degree
 Sholde be constant in adversitee
 As was Griselde, therefore Petrark writeth
 This storie, which with heigh stile he auditeth," 41

Professor Lounsbury believes that modern man, and still more the modern woman, so far from finding her conduct

41. Clerk of Oxford's Tale, l. 1142-43.

creditable, would be greatly inclined to give it the name of weak-spirited, and even despicable. Griselda fails in a woman's first duties, the defence of her offspring. This behavior is so unnatural that it makes some readers fail to realize the real excellences she is represented as manifesting.

The view is sometimes taken that the incidents of the tale were devised for the sake of defending the female character from the malicious attacks upon it that were current in mediæval ages. Instead of being the shrewish, self-seeking, and generally pestilient creatures they were then reported to be, they were capable, on the contrary of displaying the most angelic qualities of mind and heart.⁴² As the clerk ends his tale he reminds us that women like Griselda are scarce.

"But o word, lordynges, herkeneth er I go;
It were ful hard to fynde nou-a-dayes
In al a toun Grisildis thre or two;
For if that they were put to swiche assayes,
The gold of hem hath now so bad alayes
With bras, that thogh the sayne be fair at eye
It wolde rather breeste a- tye than plye!" 43

For humorous personal portrayal with a satiric touch, it is difficult in Chaucer to find any description equal to

42. Lounsbury, T. F., *Studies in Chaucer*, p. 339-344.

43. Clerk's Tale, l.1165-1169.

that of the carpenter's wife as told by the miller. The plot is one of extreme indecency, probably a combination of two different plots each typical of the medieval fabliau. Chaucer, himself, was quite aware that to many of his readers such tales would be objectionable. Lest he offend the gentles, he prefaces the coarser, fabliau tales of the miller and the reeve with an apology in which he warns the reader and at the same time disclaims any personal responsibility for the tale. Thus the blame is placed upon the narrator whom he cannot refrain from talking.

"What sholde I more seyn, but this millere
 He holde his wordes for no man forbere,
 But told his cherles tale in his manere;
 He thinketh that I shal reherce it here,
 And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
 For goddes love, demeth not that I seye
 Of evel intentes, but that I moot reherce
 Hir talles alle, be they bettre or worse,
 Or elles falsen some of my matere.
 And therefore, whose list it not yhere,
 Turn over the leef, and chese another tale;
 For he shal finde ynowe, both grate and swale.
 Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
 And eek moralitee, and holynesse,-
 Blameth not me of that ye chese anye." 44

Tudor Jenks in speaking of Chaucer's ribald and indecent stories does not entirely excuse him. He says, "There can be no objection to plain speaking where it is required, but in works of imagination the world of events is wide enough to avoid the rubbish heap." 45 Regardless of the

44. Prologue to *Miller's Tale*, l. 3167-3181.
 45. Jenks, Tudor, *In the Days of Chaucer*, p. 268.

44
tale he has cleverly described to us a young housewife.

In several ways this woman rather closely resembles what we have dubbed "the flapper". She was young, being only eighteen years of age, and of a lively demeanor.

Speaking of her build Chaucer says:

"Fair was this yonge wyf, and ther-vid-al
As any weesele hir body gent and smal." 46

and later,

"Vinsinge she was, as is a Ioly colt,
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt." 47

But who, except Chaucer, would think of comparing a young girl to a weasel or an upright bolt? Yet how vivid it makes the picture for us.

Speaking of her face, Chaucer says it was as bright and shining as a new coin. She was also one who plucked her eyebrows.

"And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye.
Ful smale y-pulled were hir browes two,
And the were bent, and blacke as any sloo." 48

In harmony with her other characteristics was her loud, boisterous singing.

"But of his song, it was as louds and yerne
As any swalwe on a berne." 49

46. Miller's Tale, l. 3233-34.

47. Miller's Tale, l. 3263-64.

48. Miller's Tale, l. 3244-45.

49. Prologue to Miller's Tale, l. 3257-8.

A modern note is found in her dress for she wore a catchy black and white costume ornamented with embroidery.

"A coyn't she werode barred al of silk,
A barmeloth eek as whyt as morne milk.
Up- on her londes, ful of many a gore.
Whyt was hir smok, and brouded bifore
And eek bihinde, on hir eoler aboute,
Of cal-blak silk, with inne and eek with-oute." 80

Then upon her low collar was a brooch as large as a shield. She was most attractive nor did her husband fail to recognise this.

"Ialous he was, and heold hir narve in cage
For she was wild and yong, and he was old." 81

Can you not picture her as girl of our day with her tall slender build, young and lithe, a face with plucked brows, and possibly a loud voice in singing? Her would a black and white ensemble be greatly amiss today.

The story shows her tricking her husband because of her love for Nicholas, a clerk. Their scheme to have her husband sleep in a basket suspended from the rafters so that he may be prepared to save his life in the time of a predicted flood was very successful until a cry of water reached his ears. He immediately cuts the ropes. But, alas, he is not able to do anything for he is ridiculed by all and is considered mad and crazy.

80. Prologue to Miller's Tale, l. 3028-40.

81. Prologue to Miller's Tale, l. 3084-85.

In the same manner that a pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, the love element in this story varies from that in courtly love tales. As courtly love, it is sensual, furtive and secret; but it lacks any of the finer element. There is no whit of good or anything that might in any way affect the finer senses.

We have already been shown the carpenter's wife in the Miller's Tale, a gay reveler who secretly tricks her husband. Of like character are: May, the wife of Phobus, Forkin Revelour's wife, the Merchant's wife, and the Miller's wife and daughter. The merchant tells in his account of the inevitable failure of the union of old age and youth. May, the faithless wife, by her clever intrigue tricks her blind husband. He recovers his sight just in time to witness his wife's infidelity, but he is persuaded that it is all done for his own good. In a similar manner, the maniple presents the wife of Phobus. In this case, the unfaithfulness is noted by a white crow that can talk. He, in his anger, slays his wife then regrets his deed. As vengeance for his crow's telling, he plucked all of the white feathers from the crow, hence he is now always black and has no gift of speech. The lesson is stated thus ;

"My sone, keepe wel thy touge and keepe thy friend;
A wicked touge is worse than a feond." 52

When the Reeve tells his tale he, too, narrates a practical joke. He grasps the opportunity to expose the tricks in the trade of the miller. His wife and daughter assist him.

Speaking of the wife, it is said,

"She was as digne as water in a ditch
And ful of hoker and of biseware."

The explanation for this is that she was haughty, proud, and repulsive like foul water in a ditch which keeps every one at a proper distance. She swore with ease and nothing pleased her more than "hir Ioly whistle wel y wet" in drinking. And like mother, like daughter; for the girl, too, was loud and coarse. One similar character is left to our imagination because the cook, who is almost too drunk too talk, is not allowed to finish his tale. Nevertheless we can imagine the character of it. Two women who have reached a mature age yet as the Man of Law says are "welles of vyces" are the Soldaness and Donegild. To Custance, they may feign piety and love but lying deeper underneath is a sting like unto that of a scorpion. Not even committing murder troubles them, but to Donegild her deeds return for she is slain by her son. Set over against these two cruel women, in the same tale is Hermengild whom Custance converted to Christian-

55. Manciple's Tale, l. 319-320.

ity. To the extent that the former women are cruel and heartless she is kind and helpful. Also of a sweet character is the mother of the little chorister in the Prioress's Tale. It is mother love that causes her to sit up all night awaiting the return of her seven year old son, then causes her to search the streets for the young chorister. How her heart must have ached when she found him, slain. After the story of the little chorister had left the company of pilgrims in sober mood, the host begins to look for the teller of the next tale. It must be a tale of mirth but not one of the coarsest sort. His glance lights upon Chaucer who begins the literary satire of a weary romance, namely, "The Rime of Sir Thopas." Before he has a chance to complete it, he is rudely interrupted. Since that rime is not acceptable, he tells another tale in prose. Professor Root comments that from the standpoint of the modern reader at least, Chaucer more than repays himself by inflicting upon the company his long tale of Melibee.⁵⁴ In it Dame Prudence who with her daughter had been attacked in her home advises her husband upon choosing good counsel. Although her points may be good her continual arguing grows wearisome.

54. Root, R. L., *Poetry of Chaucer*, page 208.

It is these contrasts in traits of character which Chaucer can so well depict that makes us want to linger in his portrait gallery. Placed side by side are kind, loving faces, cruel, scornful faces, and baser, tricking faces of both young and old.

3. Those That are Especially Under the Influence of the Church

Those women that were especially under the influence of the church are no less interesting than those discussed in the other groups. Indeed, Nicoll tells us that the church was everything for the middle ages. Its members received many a satirical shaft, often deservedly; but the church as a whole was the repository of most of the learning of that time. For the women of Chaucer's day, the nunnery was the seat of learning. Nuns, like most of the monks, devoted their time to multiplying books. Here, too, a knowledge of French and Latin was obtained. Not only was the nunnery a center of learning but it was also a center for reserved manners, says Miss Bateson. It was also possible for a girl to be placed in a nunnery yet not take the vows of the church. To her it was a means of becoming enlightened in that day when little attention was given to the instruction of a maiden outside of the household duties.

Having been at a nunnery meant a wider knowledge, and the obtaining of finer and more subtle qualities of womanhood. The Prioress of the *Canterbury Tales* whom we are about to consider is such an example of refinement as well as a representative of the church.

The rules for visiting away from the nunnery were minute and showed that regular holidays were part of the scheme. When nuns went home once a year, a religious companion must accompany them, and not the same one twice in succession. A month must suffice for a visit and they must not go from inn to inn looking for lodgings. Respect for the person of a man was one of the elementary principles of morality.

When Professor Manly discussed the women on the *Canterbury* pilgrimage, by the laws of courtesy he considered the Prioress first. Her portrait is one of the most carefully drawn portraits in the gallery of pilgrims. Many of her traits of character and sentiments are represented, making her not a mere generalized type but an individual.⁵⁵

Her costume was that which was characteristic of a nunnery or religious order. Chaucer notices that her cloak was neat and artistically made.

55. Manly, J. E., *Some New Light on Chaucer*, page 302-303.

"Ful fetis was her cloke, as I was war." 56

She wore the characteristic white pleated wimple. The distinctive part of her costume was a brooch made in the shape of a letter A surmounted by a crown.

"And ther-on heng a broche of golde ful shene,
On which there was first writen a crowned A,
And after, "amer vincit omnia." 57

This was a pin or ornament common to both sexes and the epigram was one of the most common among religious orders. The brooch had no virtue in itself but it reminded the owner of some truth of religion and so inspired him to virtue. The prioress also had with her "a peire of bedes, gauded al with grene."⁵⁸ The gaudies or gaudees were the larger beads in the set and stood for a Pater Noster while each smaller bead stood for an Ave Maria. The common number in a set was fifty-five; fifty Aves; and five Pater Nosters.⁵⁹

Her features were well developed and shapely. Her nose was long and well shaped; her mouth small, soft and red; her fair forehead, broad; and her eyes, "greye as glas", the favorite color of ladies' eyes in Chaucer's time.

Not only was she well dressed and of a good appearance,

56. Prologue to Canterbury Tales, l. 157.

57. Prologue to Canterbury Tales, l. 160-162.

58. Prologue to Canterbury Tales, l. 159.

59. Skeats Notes on Canterbury Pilgrims.

but also was she well mannered at all times. Chaucer says of her table manners:

"She leet no morsel from her lippes fall
 He wette hir fingers in her sause dore.
 Wel smede she carie a morsel and wel hope
 That he drop no fille up-on her brest.

.....
 Hir over lippe wyped she so cleue,
 That in her coppe was so ferthing sone
 Of grece, when she drunken hadde hir draughte." 60

She was being paid a high compliment in that day before forks, when eating was done with the fingers. She could even avoid wetting her fingers when dipping her food in the sauce. Nor did any grease remain on her lip to be deposited within the cup. She was especially careful because she was wearing a new habit which she would be expected to give up on her return to her convent. Her habit is holy to her: "A spot without is a spot within" was among the most venerable of community proverbs.⁶¹

Tender emotions were also characteristic of her. In need of some object upon which to lavish a natural human affection, she devoted her attentions to her pet dogs. She fed them with roasted flesh or milk and wastel bread which was made of the best flour while coarse lentil bread baked especially for that purpose was the usual food. She would

60. Prologue to *Canterbury Tales*, l. 129-135.

61. Sister Madeleine, Chaucer's Nun.

scarcely weep if one died or was hit with a stick. In fact,

"She was so charitable and so pitous
She wolde wepe, if that she saw a moun
Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or blode." 68

Pets as a general rule were not kept in nunneries except by the older sisters of fifty or sixty who were then allowed special privileges.

Other outstanding traits of this religious character were her easy smiling, her manner of singing, and her mild oath. At all times she was very reserved. And while sometimes the rough story telling was not edited for her ears, one notices that even the hilarious, Harry Bailly, grows courtly in speaking to her. Her greatest oath was by St. Loy. To swear by him was to swear by one who refused to swear. Therefore, it was no oath at all, or at any rate a very mild one for those times when nobility and even dignitaries of the church swore not merely by the saints but even by the Trinity or parts of Christ's body. The favorite oath of King Henry II was "By the very eyes of God." Her singing was intoned in her nose or had a nasal quality which was characteristic of the singing of the mass for this mode was less fatiguing to the vocal organs. But no religious recites or sings the service aloud while traveling.

68. Prologue, l. 147-150.

Professor Hanly declares that many students of Chaucer believe that Chaucer is taking a pleasant jibe at the rusticity of the Prioress when he speaks thus of her use of the French language,

"And French she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,
For the French of Paris was to hir unknowe." 63

Professor Sweet comes valiantly to her defence and states that Chaucer is not speaking slightly of her French. She correctly spoke the usual Anglo-French of the English court, not the Parisian French, but since she had never travelled extensively she was quite satisfied with the French she had learned at home.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Professor Hanly states that it is hard to believe that Chaucer was not indulging in a bit of good-humored ridicule since there are other pleasant jibes and humor in the portrait. New evidence offers a new explanation. The queen's sister was a resident at Stratford, surely she would have furnished the model for the speaking of French. But hers was like that of the Queen, not Parisian but the kind spoken in Hainault, a province of what we now call Flanders. Sir Frank Heath, one of the editors of the well known Globe edition of Chaucer, believes that Chaucer's enjoyment of such a jibe would

63. *Prologue*, l. 124-126

64. Sweet's Notes.

have been greater because his wife Philippa was also from Hainault and probably also spoke the French of the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe.⁶⁵

The nuns so lived in the spirit of solemn liturgical prayer that their very lives became colored by it and their speech took on the phraseology of the psalms and hymns. When the prioress tells her beautiful tale of the little chorister she opens and ends the story with a prayer.⁶⁶

Throughout the trip the Prioress remains the pure symbol of the church. She is accompanied by a second nun in accordance with the religious rules. She remains always gentle, gracious, stately, and an upholder of the world's ideals.

The Virgin Mary cult of that day is well expressed in one of Chaucer's earliest of the minor poems. It is a song according to the letters of the alphabet. It is said to have been written at the request of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, as a prayer for her private use.

"Al myghty and al mercyable Queene,
To whom that al this world fleeth for secour
Flourish Virgine, of alle flouris flour,
To thee I flee confounded in errour."⁶⁷

65. Manly, J. H. *Some New Light on Chaucer*, p. 219-20.

66. Sister Madeleine, *Chaucer's Nuns*.

67. Chaucer's A B C, l. 1-5.

This cult incited many maidens to take the veil. It was not necessary to become a nun to remain in the monastery. It was possible to later forsake this retreat for ordinary life. To the young maiden was presented a dark picture of married life. It involved thraldom, pains of mind and body and constant vexations. In fact the queen and nobility "lick honey from thorns" and "buy all the sweet with two parts of bitter." If these are the women with a sufficient dowry, think of the poor who, unable to buy themselves a bridegroom of their own rank, give themselves into servitude to a man of lower station. A homilist further remarks:

"Well it were for them were they on the day of their bridal borne to be buried!"⁶⁸ A contrasting picture presented in the *Cursor Mundi*, an encyclopedic book of scriptural story, is that of the Virgin Mary "a lady more true, loyal and constant than any other, more beautiful and ready to reward."

Since "love paramours" had become the fashion because of the reading of romances, the church profited by the fascination of romantic tales by conveying religious truths in a similar guise. The young women were to continue in their dreams of love, but the unseen object of their affec-

68. Schofield, *U. E.*, *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer*, p. 351.

tion was to be the Lord Christ. One remote writer in giving advice on the choosing of the best lover wrote:

"He who loves this fleeting world is blind. Men fade as a leaf on a bough. His love is inconstant, untrue." 69.

And later,

"The only worthy lover is Christ. If she only knew his good ways, how fair and bright He is of hme, how glad of cheer and mild of mood, how lovesome and how true of trust, she would not hesitate to yield herself to Him. He is the richest in the whole world. Even King Henry bears no comparison to Him. He is eager for the maiden's love. He asks no dowry.....He has given her a treasure greater than silver and gold, which she must carefully guard--her virginity, a gemstone most precious, the jewel of greatest price, 'set in the gold of heaven,' which shineth above all in heaven's bower. While she preserves it pure, she is sweeter than any spice. Christ is the lover for her to choose." 70.

Several of the young maidens in Chaucer's works choose virginity as their guiding ideal. In the Knight's tale Emily, a fair vision of womanly beauty and grace, speaks thus to the goddess Diana:

"Chaste goddesses, wel wostow that I
Desire to been a mayden al my lyf,
He never wel I be no love no wyf." 71

Nevertheless, just before the end of the story she is happily wed to Palamon, a rival lover with his cousin, Arcite. A similar maiden, one of spotless purity is Virginia in the

69. Schofield, W. H., *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer*, p. 576.

70. Schofield, W. H., *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer*, p. 440.

71. Knight's Tale, l.2606-2609.

Physician's Tale. Her loveliness attracts a wicked lustful magistrate but rather than release her to such a person her father kills her, then takes her head to the ruler. The parting words of the daughter are:

"Blessed be God, that I shall dye a mayde,
Yif no my deeth, or that I have a shame;
Deeth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddis name." 78

Although the fabled eagle in the Parliament of Fowles is not a human being, she possesses the qualities and powers of one. Therefore, she may be considered under this heading. Although she is ardently wooed by two terrestrial eagles, she accepts neither, at least not for a period of another year. However, it is not definitely stated whether the cause was one of chastity or one of indecision. At least, she does not hastily enter marriage because the opportunity presents itself.

Added to the virginity was the lives of saints. Pious tales of devout living were produced by the clergy for the edification of the people. The lives of saints were ever present in the minds of English people. They celebrated the saints days in divine service. Appeals were made to them for aid in the daily emergencies of life. Their acts were commemorated in paintings, carving, metal designs, and

78. Physician's Tale, l.240-250.

embroidery. To their shrines, pilgrimages were made from all parts of the world.⁷³ Therefore, it is not surprising that in his collection of Canterbury tales Chaucer included a saint's legend, that of St. Cecilia. It could not have on any more fitting narrator than the second nun who accompanied the Prioress. The tale, one of the conventional type, is a story of martyrdom told with tender sympathies.

Another aspect of the typical saint's legend is the story of Constance or, as Chaucer writes Custance, as told by the Man of Law. The story consists of a series of improbable episodes bound together merely by the accident that they all happen to one person. Professor Root maintains that what raises this legend into the realm of true art and even gives to it a high degree of spiritual unity is the wonderfully beautiful personality of Constance. She presents no baffling problem of motives nor complexities to fascinate the intellect, but from the first she is utterly transparent and perfect. Under all conditions of adversity or prosperity, she is the same, always unmoved and unshaken. Ten Brink comments, "The heroine here appears almost a personification of Christianity itself, such as it comes to heathen nations."

73. Schofield, W. E., *English Literature from Norman Conquest to Chaucer*, p. 396-397.

is maligned and persecuted, yet, in the strength of its 74
 Founder, endures in patience and finally remains victorious:
 Christianity bids us to shake off the traits or markings
 which distinguish us from our perfect pattern. In present-
 ing Custance, Chaucer has presented to us a person who seems
 almost unreal because she does possess such marked perfec-
 tion.

XII

SOME CONCLUSIONS DRAWN

Chaucer is not a theologian nor a contemplative philos-
 opher, but he is an observer who holds the mirror to con-
 temporary life in its infinite variety of high and low. So
 well does he portray activities and represent characters,
 although some of them may belong to extinct types, they
 continue contemporary and familiar forever. For us, with
 an artist's touch, he paints the woman in all phases and
 walks of life. One wonders where he obtained such a know-
 ledge. We must recall that he was a man of affairs and a
 traveler for his day. More than once he had been on the
 continent in France or Italy, either in military or diplo-
 matic service. He probably enjoyed mingling with the crowd

74. Rees, R. K., *The Poetry of Chaucer*, p. 126.

and observing those about him. Then too, Chaucer had connections with the court. He served under Queen Philippa who had come from Flanders and he also knew well the queen's daughter-in-law, Blanche. She was the wife of John of Gaunt who was about the same age as Chaucer. It was in memory of her that he composed his poem, "The Death of Blanche the Duchess." From old records, it is believed that Philippa, the wife of Chaucer, came from Flanders in Queen Philippa's retinue in 1360. She was in the service of the queen and Blanche, the duchess, until their death in 1369 when the Black Death swept over the country for the third time. We know nothing of the courtship or married life of Chaucer, whether it was founded on love or more practical consideration, or whether it was one of happiness or regret. There exist no external facts for light on the subject.¹

Furthermore, no reference made by Chaucer either for or against women can be reckoned as satisfactory evidence upon either side of the question. In Chaucer's day, attacks on women and marriage formed a staple subject. By these writers in particular who did not belong to the clerical body, it was rarely anything more than conventional utterance which was in full accord with the tradition in

1. French, R. D., *A Chaucer Handbook*, pages 49-51.

which they had been brought up.² Some times, the words are susceptible of a double meaning, not because of his fondness for double meanings, but doubtless because ambiguity furnished in many cases a secure fortress into which he could retire when hard pressed. This method leaves the reader uncertain whether the poet is wholly in earnest or simply laughing up his sleeve.³

The facts of Chaucer's life, it has been observed, furnish no direct information concerning his literary work. But we are safe in making a guess that life on a whole was good to him. Generally speaking, his criticism of women is urbane. He is curious, not cruel, nor is he cynical. His sketches, a combination of vivacity and veracity, are filled with an all pervading humor, with a kindly touch, often lightened by a tolerant smile. Chaucer, the artist, presents the women of his day. Clark points out that Chaucer is one who has exalted our ideal of the womanly character. This has been borne out in my study of Chaucer's women, no where better expressed than in his "Womanly Noblesse."

"So hath my herte caught in remembrance
Your beaute boel, and stedfast governaunce.
Your vertues alle, and your hy noblesse,
That you to serve is set al my plesuraunce;
So wel me lyketh your womanly countenaunce,
Your fresche fetures and your comelinesse,
That whyl I live, my herte to his maistresse,
You hath ful chose, in trow pereseveraunce,
Never to chaunge, for no maner distresse.

E. Lounsbury, T. F., *Studies in Chaucer*, Vol. I, pp. 114-14.
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