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**Women in *The Canterbury
Tales*: the Prioress, the Wife of
Bath, the Second Nun,
a hen and a lady falcon**

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ABSTRACT

In a society controlled by men, the Church and its authorities, fourteen century women had little space for their personal aspirations in life. Their submission and passivity to men controlled all the facets of their existence. Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales present a unique and copious vision of medieval society through his variety of characters belonging to different social classes, thus providing the perfect source from which to analyze women's roles in the Middle Ages. From his twenty-nine pilgrims, Chaucer only chose to introduce three women: the Prioress, the Wife of Bath and the Second Nun. Though many other women appeared in the Tales, none of them were given voice. This choice yields many interpretations, from those who critique Chaucer to those who applaud him. This work analyzes the roles of the three medieval women who appear in The Canterbury Tales, their possibilities in such society and tests if their depiction is accurate. Aspects such as their characterization, attitudes and actions from both their Prologues and Tales will be studied according to already existing analyses. Moreover, two other uncommon but surprising female characters, a hen and a lady falcon, will be investigated and subjected to the supposition of "what if" they could be considered as representatives of real medieval women. In doing so, a better understanding of Chaucer's women characters, and most importantly, of the women's role in such era, will be presented.

Keywords: medieval women, Geoffrey Chaucer, nun, wife

1. INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer is considered to be one of the most important poets in the history of English Literature, given that his best-known book, *The Canterbury Tales*, has been studied and analyzed by scholars all over the world, from different perspectives and during different periods in time. Many have been the researches focused on *The Canterbury Tales*, i.e. critical studies (Stone, 1989), introductions to this book (Phillips, 2000), writings on the Prologue (Lamb, 1966), and innumerable other theses aimed at the interpreting of each pilgrim and their stories, such as the Knight's story (Sánchez-Martí, 2000), the Clerk's (Brock, 1996), the Squire's (Kahrl, 1973), etc.

In addition to these investigations concentrated on the analysis of Chaucer's characters, it is as well substantial mentioning the numerous studies already performed on the women present in *The Canterbury Tales*. The inquiry of women's role in this book is not recent and has increased since the twentieth century. For example, Filax (1987) stated that "women's previous historical invisibility has been a persistent theme and matter of investigation" and that his study aimed to "provide the background against which to consider the three women pilgrims, who, with approximately twenty-six male pilgrims, make their pilgrimage to Canterbury" (p. 1). Thus, although male characters in *The Canterbury Tales* surpassed the female ones by great significance and researches were

mainly targeted at the studying of these male characters and their function, multifold writers decided to study the matter of women in this book, including Vaněčková (2007), Baker (1992), Sturges (1983), along with others. These writers might have acquired their interest in studying women, as myself, from their curiosity in women's conditions, a subject debated throughout history. In a changing society, the role of medieval women suffered little variation and during the Middle Age, literature exhibits this lack of change.

Medieval society was undoubtedly a male dominant one. The Church had great influence on this hierarchy, considering that England was a Catholic country. Accordingly, the Bible influenced roughly every aspect of the medieval Englishmen's principles. Additionally, the literary tradition of the time was led by monks. Vaněčková (2007) mentioned that since the "literary tradition was primarily religious, attitude to women, family, and other everyday issues were determined by the Church as well" (p. 8). There were little options a medieval woman could aspire to when leaving their parents. In this fashion, Zimmermann (2014) classified the four roles of medieval women: the first one, while still unmarried, a woman was supposed to be a father's daughter; the second, after marrying, she was a husband's wife; the third, a nun if she followed a religious vocation; and the fourth one, a mother. Chaucer only offered three female narrators in *The Canterbury Tales*: the Prioress, the Wife of

Bath and the Second Nun. At first glance, readers could assume that, by only including stereotype women in his book, Chaucer is an author who, like his coeval writers and taking into consideration his culture societal conventions, apparently disfavors women. But by making these three women narrators, Chaucer proves the total opposite: he gives them voice.

In this manner, the purpose of this work is to analyze the three female pilgrims and determine if they are totally accurate representatives of the medieval society by taking into account the existing works on the subject matter. In doing so, it is important to, firstly, have a grasp of Chaucer's life and his society. Last but not least, two more unusual but simultaneously special women, a hen and a lady falcon, will be subjected to the possibility of "what if" they are interpreted as real women. Under this approach, their representation as medieval women will be tested.

2. CHAUCER AND *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

The medieval society was a hierarchical one, divided into three main estates: the nobility, the clergy and the laborers. Chaucer started as a member of the last group but, although his beginnings in life were humble, he still had an advantage on the premise that his father was a thriving London wine merchant. He was not born a noble but he did climb the social ladder. While he could never be recognized as one, as this title was inherited only, he did manage to

form part of the court life. Throughout his lifetime, Chaucer was in some way connected with the members of the Royal Family. He maintained several occupations, such as a courtier, a civil servant, sometimes a diplomat, and others. Although he lived under three kings, his transition from one to another was smooth even though the kings' lives were tumultuous. He married Philippa de Roet, queen Philippa's lady-in-waiting, and had with her a son, Thomas Chaucer, and presumably two daughters, Elizabeth and Agnes Chaucer, though "records do not clearly identify them as daughters of the poet" (Benson, 2008, p. xii).

It is of great importance to observe how his courtly life and travelling as a diplomat reinforced his literary production. These experiences made it possible for him to write about people with diverse backgrounds, from different estates, and with different occupations. Each one of his characters is dissimilar in its own way. This diversity contributed to Chaucer's rich writing style and to his admirable ability to depict people's traits and their relationships among classes and with other people.

Many have been Chaucer's literary works but his most important one and the best known is *The Canterbury Tales*. It is a collection of twenty-four stories narrated in first-person by a group of pilgrims heading to Canterbury. All pilgrims encounter each other in the Tabard Inn in Southwark and engage in a contest in which each one has to recount four stories to the Host, Harry Bailey, who

would reward the winner with a free supper. Two stories were to be narrated on the way to Canterbury and the other two on the way back, but Chaucer left this book unfinished and only completed twenty-four tales out of hundred and twenty (Lamb, 1966). Before the telling of the stories, Chaucer wrote the *General Prologue*, which he probably finished before the tales were completed. Here, Chaucer introduces the pilgrims and uses his skilled narration style to establish an image of his society. His intention is to briefly describe “the appearance, character and occupation of twenty-two out of twenty-nine pilgrims, the remaining seven being merely listed” (Stone, 1989, p. 27). The *Tales* are connected through joining passages, all but two having *Prologues*.

The growth of London was a noted occurrence in the first half of the English fourteenth century. During this period, the capital increased its size and importance within major continental cities, leading to the developing power of a comparatively new social class, the middle class. Accordingly, its members are portrayed in the *Tales*, insomuch as Chaucer’s pilgrims vary from members of minor nobility to lower classes, including professions, religious orders and trades. The Merchant, the Shipman, the Franklin, the Wife of Bath, as well as other characters from the *Tales*, are members of the middle classes. Apart from illustrating by means of his characters diversified classes together and portraying each of its representatives, Chaucer likewise takes an interest in illustrating his characters’ individualities

and relationships (Kudrnová, 2010). This diversity applies not only to social classes, but also to the subjects addressed, styles, conflicting moralities and the range of genres. But one thing is for sure, that all pilgrims were brought together by holiday spirit and religious purposes and Chaucer shows his narrations via “satire, farce or of social and domestic sitcom” (Phillips, 2000, p. 5).

As commented before, The *Canterbury Tales* is a formidable source of knowledge about the medieval society, ranging from social structure, moral questions, religious matters, and so forth. Although the topics are varied and of extreme importance, the focus of this work is the representation of women in this book. Chaucer presents a great deal of information about his era, specifically about women, whom he illustrates both positively and negatively according to the social norms.

3. THE ROLE OF FOURTEEN-CENTURY WOMEN

Medieval literature certainly portrays women’s state in its society. Research on women in the Middle Ages has increased over the last thirty years and has become a critical element in Medieval Studies. Zimmerman (2014) reaches the same conclusion as one of his previous studies of women in the Middle Ages:

if a woman was lucky – preferably well-off and married to a man who did not drink or beat her too much – she could enjoy a

relative comfort. But her rights were far from what minstrels and fairy tales would have us believe (p. 44).

Men and other authority figures had more noticeably prominent roles compared to those of women in Middle Ages. The medieval world was definitely a man's world and women had very few positions among it (Howell & Howell, 1981). As stated before by Zimmerman, a woman could aspire to be only four possible positions: a father's daughter, a husband's wife, a nun or a mother.

When married, all of a woman's assets would become her husband's and she had nothing to say about it. Before and after marriage, women had little options but they could theoretically dissolve their marriages through ecclesiastical courts of appeal. However, not many appeals have been made. One of the possible reasons, but the least probable, could be that women were happy in their marriages. Yet another reason, and most likely, was that the trouble they had to be subjected to was extremely considerable and risky, considering that they would revolt against their husbands and thus be alienated by their own families, in-laws and even create a scandal. Besides, the trials almost always had only one outcome: one in the husband's favor. Divorce for medieval women was possible only for very few of them, since a marriage could be dissolved solely on the grounds of blood-ties up to the fourth grade. Not even when her husband passed away did a woman inherit his assets. If the husband had sons or brothers, the fortune would become theirs. Only

if the sons were not of age, then the mother or the widow was responsible for their assets until they were old enough to claim their inheritance. A wife's only possible change of becoming an heir was when her husband had no sons or brothers. Women with property had a certain level of power in the community but never nearly as men.

If a woman desired a life free of arranged marriages, she had one option if still a virgin: a life of chastity. For this reason, she was granted the protection of the Church and considered as "daughters of Eve" and personifications of the pure Virgin Mary. Zimmerman clearly states that:

the clergy was most disturbed by women's sexuality, which, they protested, kept both them and their husbands (as well as almost all who come in touch with women) from concentrating on the well-being of their souls. It is therefore not at all surprising that the church encouraged women to lead a life of virginity and seclusion in order to save their endangered souls (p. 53).

Women's lives within convents and monasteries did not differ considerably from their outside world living. The patriarchal hierarchy was present in Church as well, with the male authorities first, followed by the abbesses or mother superiors, other female officials, nuns, novices and lay sisters. A woman's endowment made the convent decide her position in it.

Hardly did wives gain control over their weaker husbands' possessions by manipulation. Hence, such women acquired lands and properties by inheriting while their husbands lived and even after their deaths. These women challenged the norm of the medieval society of women's inferior position, *ergo* making them dangerous and mischievous.

With respect to their responsibilities, women living in rural areas, apart from daily chores, upbringing their children and attending their husband's needs, often helped their husbands with the field duties. Brewing, baking and manufacturing textiles were also some of their possible tasks. As to urban women, they had similar duties as rural ones. However, with the rising of middle classes and the decline of feudalism, as mentioned before, they could become employees at their fathers or husbands trade and craft guilds (Kowaleski & Bennett, 1989).

Wealthy and noble women had similar fates since exact marriage and Church rules applied to them likewise. Nonetheless, they lived privileged lives. Servants relieved them from cooking, cleaning and childcare, thereby providing them with the opportunity of engaging in other activities, such as hunting, dancing and playing games.

4. WOMEN IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

Out of the twenty-nine pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*, as already stated, only three were women: the Prioress, the Wife of Bath and the Second Nun. Notwithstanding, many other women appear as part of the tales. Among these women, two of them are not human and form part of fables tradition: a hen named Pertelote introduced in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, and a lady falcon in *The Squire's Tale*.

The three female narrators are shown as individuals in a subjective tone, and they are to represent the two basic roles of medieval women: nuns or wives. But, although the two nuns imitate the female voices of religion, they present two different attitudes towards this calling. Besides, the wife of Bath is considered by many the most controversial character in the *Tales*.

In relation to the two female animals, I had little success in my examination for sources which considered them as real women, consequently finding scarce information concerned with this issue. Pertelote is a wife, although she dares contradict her husband. The lady falcon's story, however, since *The Quire's Tale* was left unfinished by Chaucer, is incomplete likewise. The falcon's role is that of an abandoned by her beloved fragile woman who wandered over the earth without direction and now excessively weak.

In such manner, although women are by far outnumbered by male characters, allegedly three of the four possible roles of the

diverse types of medieval women, excluding that of a father's daughter, are described by Chaucer through these three main female characters.

4.1. The Prioress

The very first pilgrim woman is the Prioress, Madame Eglentine, and she is the fourth character introduced by Chaucer in the *General Prologue*, following the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman, in this manner hinting at her nobility. “Ther was also a Nonne, a PRIORESSE,” (I, 118) emphasizes the fact that she is not just a nun but a prioress, thus pointing at her wealth and generous donation to the convent. Apart from her being a learned woman who spoke fluent French, her refined social behavior is another sign of her wealth: “At mete wel ytaught was she with alle: / She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,” (I, 127-28). Even her physical appearance displays her social background:

Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.
Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ther was first write a crowned a,
And after *Amor vincit omnia*. (I, 157-62)

Such attire was unusual for nuns. However, women of good lineage continued to exhibit their status through refined clothing and adornments (Nelson, 1997).

Her character is described as “desport”, “plesaunt”, “amiable”, “charitable”, full of “conscience” and “tendre herte” to such extent that she would easily weep if someone dares hurt an animal. Moreover, she owned dogs, practice which was not allowed in the Church and the suggestion of her lapdogs meaning “more to her than the poor and wretched ... provides the first clear sign of Chaucer’s satirical intentions in the poem” (Winy, 1975, p. 13). The Prioress resembles a heroine from popular medieval romances (Lamb, 1966), yet her vanity and preoccupation with other people’s opinions about her indicate her basic humanity: “And peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere, / And to ben holden digne of reverence.” (I, 139-41). This leads to the idea of the two nuns’ different attitudes towards their calling mentioned before. The Prioress chose the convent or was chosen for her with the romantic notion of Christ’s bride (Vaněčková, 2007).

The Prioress starts her *Prologue* by praising God and the Virgin Mary. *The Prioress’s Tale* describes a mother whose little boy, clergeon, is murdered by Jews when singing *Gaude Maria*, a song dedicated to Virgin Mary. She searches for her son and miraculously finds him through his singing: the boy had Virgin Mary’s protection and even though his throat was slit, he continued singing. She is also

given subjectivity with her admiration for the widow and the little boy from her tale. Nonetheless, she admires children and women but eludes men from such admiration: “O martir, sowed to virginitee,” (VII, 579), “This poure wydwe awaiteth al that nyght” (VII, 586). Her opinion about monks, “This abbot, which that was an hooly man, / As monkes been - or elles oghte be” (VII, 642-43) reflects her perspectives of men. She follows the patriarchal order but her comments suggest her poor view of men.

Clearly, Madame Eglentine is presented as a sentimental woman, and most importantly, a nun. However, her actions do not indicate that she is a fully spiritual being devoted to God and depict her as an ambiguous character. Her almost veneration of mothers and children is unusual for a nun; her whole attention should be towards God only. It may be argued that this glorification in her tale could be what she lacks in her own life. Vaněčková (2007) denotes that the Prioress “is a woman who needs love, and ... a perfect image of femininity captured in the world of strict rules” (p. 32). Although Vaněčková’s statement may seem exaggerated, everything in the Prioress’s narration may lead to such conclusions. The reader is never informed whether she joined the convent voluntarily or by force, or about her wishes and aspirations in life previous to this. Therefore, although some aspects of Madame Eglentine are a critique by Chaucer to his society, others perfectly represent a nun from the Middle Ages.

4.2. The Wife of Bath

“A good WIF was ther of biside BATHE,” (I, 445). From the very first line in her introduction, Alison is defined as a wife, and most importantly, a “good wife”. Everything about her is exaggerated, from the number of husbands she had, “Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,” (I, 460), to the times she travelled to Jerusalem, “And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;” (I, 463), and finally to her physical appearance, “A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,” (I, 472). Her greatest talents are cloth-making and knowing the remedies of love. Varied adjectives such as “deef”, “wrooth”, “fair” face, “worthy”, “gap-toothed”, and “large” hips define her.

All of these descriptions make Alison appear more as a real woman. She is not flawless and most of the adjectives used lead the reader to thinking of a typical woman of the Middle Ages. Her actions in church, “In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon / That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon; / And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she, / That she was out of alle charitee.” (I, 449-52), reflect the behavior of a boisterous woman, but when “In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.” (I, 472), demonstrating she is a very likable company.

In the lines from the *General Prologue* about Alison, two facts attract attention the most: her five husbands and her habit of going on pilgrimages. Alison afforded the luxury of going alone on

pilgrimages due to her properties and possessions from her commercially valuable skills, thus providing her the means to travel, be it domestically or internationally. Yet the main reason Alison had five husbands is simply because she enjoyed the company of men. Chaucer goes further and makes allusions about her other possible company, “Withouten oother compaignye in youthe,” (I, 461). In any case, this is merely a sketch of the magnanimous dimensions of her character portrait which are to follow.

The Wife’s *Prologue* is divided into “three parts: a discussion of marriage and virginity, a description of the Wife’s methods of dealing with her first three husbands, and narratives of her relationship to her fourth and fifth” (Phillips, 2000, p. 91). In this regard, the Wife is given subjectivity. Her guide are experiences rather than authority, “EXPERIENCE, tough noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is mariage;” (III, 1-3), and she comments on her past, her actions and feelings, her beliefs and the rules of society which she belongs to and everyone adheres. Essentially, Alison does two things in her *Prologue*: she gives an account of her love life and defends it. Her defense is mainly made by criticizing the medieval patriarchal society she lives in, provided her experiences as a wife, her traveling, her profession as a cloth-maker and her experiences with trading and different social classes. Patterson (1983, p. 664) describes her as a

woman who “combines the roles of widow and go-between: she is an *entremetteuse* who prepares the way to herself.”

While it has been debated throughout the years and although not of specific concern for this work, it is interesting to see how many authors and readers have wondered, says Rigby (2000), if the text is feminist or anti-feminist, for the Wife’s tale may seem a defense of women’s rights and, at the same time, she embodies most of the medieval women’s qualities of which medieval anti-feminist authors would brand as inappropriate and manipulative. Moreover, this author makes a distinction between scholars who “have been divided into two irreconcilable camps” (2000, p. 133). The first group, Rigby goes on, is that of “those critics who argue that Chaucer intends us to take seriously the Wife’s defense of women against their clerical detractors.” The second one consists of those critics who think that

there is no such thing as *the* feminist interpretation of Chaucer for us to agree or disagree with when feminist critics themselves have seen the Wife as an example both of Chaucer’s sympathy with women and of his complicity with the misogynist culture of his day (p. 134).

This second group of critics claim that Chaucer meant the Wife’s story to be judged by his readers taking into account the expected attitudes women in medieval culture should obey to. Nevertheless, this dispute leads to the issue of who is really speaking

in the Wife's *Prologue*, being quite clear for Rigby "that Alison is the mouthpiece of Chaucer's own views" (2000, p. 134).

The first part of her *Prologue*, previously mentioned, speaks about marriage and virginity. In her arguments for why a woman has as many rights as a man in using her sexual organs as she pleases during marriage, she appeals to holy scriptures and attacks the Church's teachings on virginity. She admits that "Virginitee is greet perfeccion," (III, 105) but implying the opposite, "In swich estaat as God hath cleped us / I wol persevere; I am nat precius. / In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent." (III, 147-50). Here, we find contradictions and different stereotypes in one character. In line III 203, she states that she has no interest in sex, whereas in lines III 408-17, Alison admits that she did consent to it with her first three husbands only to get money from them. Furthermore, in III 485 she guarantees of having been faithful to her husbands but in III 622-26 she exults that she always follows her indiscriminate "appetit".

What follows is her narration of her five husbands. "The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;" (III, 197), says Alison about her first three husbands over whom she established domination, especially by demanding from them more activity in bed than they could manage. The fourth was quite the opposite; a hard-drinking adulterer. She was still young when she met him and witty enough to return the jealousy by making him believe she had other lovers.

Unfortunately, just as she dominates them, they die. Her fifth husband, Jankyn, who she met at her fourth husband's funeral, was twenty and Alison forty when they married. He was a violent man who often beat her but made amends through his skills in bed. With their union, the battle of sexes emerges into the open (Stone, 1989). Jankyn was a studied man who possessed mainly anti-feminist literature extracted from the classics and the Church Fathers. As he read aloud from his collection, Alison could not stand to such offensive portrayals of women and "Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght / Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke / I with my fest so took hym on the cheke / Than in oure fyr he fil backward adoun." (III, 790-93). In view of this, he attacked and hit her, consequently making her partly deaf. Laying on the ground, she pretended to be dead and such was Jankyn's remorse that he promised never to hit her again and burned his book. In this way, Alison gains power over her fifth husband and they both swear to be truthful to one another.

The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* shows us Alison's animosity against masculine tyranny, her delight in prevailing over it, her unease of inevitable old age, and her bliss in reminiscing the joys of happy love. All these aspects make her *Prologue* "a memorable poetry of human, and especially feminine, life" (Stone, 1989, p. 88).

The Wife of Bath's Tale, an Arthurian romance, is one of the longest tales in the book and follows the folk theme of the Loathly Hag, in which the initially hideous old lady tests a knight's chivalry,

either by demanding a kiss from him or forcing him into marriage to later be asked if he prefers her beautiful by day and ugly by night, or vice versa. The Wife tells the tale of a knight, who, while hunting, rapes a country girl. King Arthur decides that his wife, the Queen, should handle his punishment. The Queen promises the knight his life back only if he answers a simple question before the end of twelve months' period: "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren." (III, 905). The very last day, he meets the Loathly Hag, who helps him answer the question in exchange of him doing what she desires. Of course, the answer is that "'Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee" (III, 1038). After being released and faced with the two options by the hag, the knight chivalrously lets her decide after truly manifesting his intentions to stay with her regardless. She then transforms herself into a beautiful bride. Though the knight becomes submissive to the hag, she also obeys him in everything. Dueck (2007, p. 13) points out that this obedience "however, is tempered by the fact that she possesses the mastery in the marriage" and that the hag's sovereignty is not used in an abusive manner since "the knight's submission to the hag garners him sexual pleasure."

The Wife closes the tale with a prayer very specific of her; requesting obedient husbands for women and cursing men who do not obey their wives.

... and Jhesu Crist us sende

Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,

And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (III, 1258-64)

Undoubtedly, the female characters from the Wife's tale, in particular Arthur's queen, the hag, and the dazzling bride, are all created by Alison as reflections of herself.

The Wife of Bath is, without question, a privileged medieval woman with enough resources to travel the world and, at the same time, maintaining five husbands. But her extravagancy does not end here. She is a wife and a woman who does not fear men and the society's thinking, especially since she is clever enough to justify her actions by quoting and counterattacking with valid arguments the sayings found in the Bible and made by the Church and its representatives. However, it is most unlikely that there could ever have existed a woman, and especially a wife, such as her in her society who would express her revolutionary thoughts so freely. The Wife of Bath is a character which presents many embellishments and though she does depict wives in Middle Ages, most certainly she does not represent all of them. Such wives were to be obedient to her husbands and not the other way around.

4.3. The Second Nun

Contrary to the other two pilgrim women, the Second Nun is only mentioned but not described in the *General Prologue*. Many would state that this lack of portrait gives the reader an opportunity of interpreting her characteristics. She does not converse with other pilgrims and she only speaks when asked to tell her story.

Her *Prologue* is similar to the Prioress's: she praises religion and prays to Virgin Mary. But before this, she gives a sermon against idleness: "THE MINISTRE and norice unto vices / Which that men clepe in Englishsh ydelnesse," (VIII, 1-2).

The Second Nun's Tale refers to the life of St. Cecilia, a saint who preached Christianity. The Second Nun, following her sermon against idleness, offers her own translation of the story: "I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse / After the legende, in translacioun" (VIII, 24-25). St. Cecelia married a man named Valerian but never had sexual intercourse; she decided to stay truthful to her religion and maintain her virginity. Such opposition to marital duties was unusual since women would obey their husbands' wishes and attend their needs. However, St. Cecilia opposes to normal marriage traditions. Additionally, she rejects moral male authority by stating that God is the only man she answers to:

Almachius seyde, 'Ne takestow noon heede
Of my power?', And she answerde hym this:

‘Youre myght,’ quod she, ‘ful litel is to dreede.
For every mortal mannes power nys
But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys.
For with nedles poynt, whan it is blowe,
May al the boost of it be leyd ful lowe.’ (VIII, 435-441)

The Second Nun considers St. Cecilia’s life full of suffering and exaltations: “Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,” (VIII, 26). Such were the Nun’s beliefs about married life. Having herself avoided the predicaments of marriage and favoring chastity, she appreciates a life dedicated to prayer and studying.

In this manner, the two nuns, the Prioress and the Second Nun, as reinforced earlier in this work, are quite different. While the Second Nun rejoices in her lack of family obligations, the Prioress yearns for them. The Second Nun narrates St. Cecilia’s troubles to reflect her own. While the first one is characterized by her intelligence, the second one is by her emotion.

The Second Nun is a believable character, satisfied with the life she selected for herself and who expresses satisfaction to have access to education, serving as a representative of medieval nuns. Even though her life is quite conventional, her attitude resembles to the Wife of Bath and Prioress’s one: she freely expresses her ideals, particularly those related to men.

4.4. The hen and the lady falcon

A hen and a lady falcon are not humans, never mind a woman pilgrim. Many sources summarize the animals' tales but none focus on their significance. This is understandable in the view of the fact that they form part of fables, short stories which convey moral meaning. Nonetheless, it is important to analyze them and wonder of a possible "what if" real medieval women could be able to behave like them. Although their tales fixate on moral meanings, this work focuses on women. In this regard, only the aspects related to them will be taken into consideration.

The hen, on the one hand, is introduced in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Pertelote is the favorite wife out of seven of a majestic cock, Chauntecleer, who one night dreams about a fox, becomes worried for his life and sees the dream as a prophecy (Hussey, 1974). The seven hens are "... for to doon al his plesaunce," (VII, 3663), meaning that they were all obedient wives but Pertelote was the one who controlled his heart: "Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire, / And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire," (VII, 3668-70). Chauntecleer tells her about his dream and her reaction is rather unexpected, accusing her beloved of being not manly enough: "'Avoy!' quod she, 'fy on yow, hertelees! / Allas!' quod she, 'for, by that God above, / Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love. / I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!'" (VII, 3705-08). She explains

that dreams are not prophecy and to believe the contrary is foolish. Yet his dream does come true.

Pertelote, if an existing medieval woman, she would be a daring one according to medieval principle of behavior. Wives were not expected to contradict their husbands, much less in public, as the hen does. Yet, she does represent one out of the four women's roles repeated several times: she is a wife, but not totally submissive.

The lady falcon, on the other hand, appears in *The Squire's Tale*. She is found on a tree by princess Canace, who received a gift from her father which made her understand what birds said. The lady falcon precedes to tell her story, full of grief and lamentations since her lover abandoned her for another. Their love lasted for a few years, "This laste lenger than a yeer or two," (V, 574), but then he decided to leave with the promise of returning:

So on a day of me he took his leve,
So sorwefully eek that I wende verraily
That he had felt as mucche harm as I,
Whan that I herde hym speke, and saugh his hewe.
But nathelees, I thoughte he was so trewe,
And eek that he repaire sholde ageyn
Withinne a litel while, sooth to seyn; (V, 584-90)

After his abandonment, she wandered the earth in her remorse. Such is her fatigue that she faints only for Princess Canace to catch and nurse her back to health.

Probably, the lady falcon's story, if applied to a medieval woman, would be convincing to a certain extent. First of all, the lady falcon mentions that her love with the handsome falcon lasted for two or three years, but never if they were married. Of course, if we consider her a real woman, they must have been married, otherwise they would be committing an offense. Further, her grief and despair are human reactions to which any woman would adhere given her conditions. Nonetheless, her behavior could perfectly be applicable to a medieval woman.

5. CONCLUSION

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a bounteous source which provides splendid insight into medieval life, particularly about women's life. Through the vivid descriptions of its characters, Chaucer creates a remarkable depiction of people's lives in fourteenth-century England. Their intricacy and naturalness make his characters archetypes of their historical roles, roles which are particularly explored by female narrators and characters.

All of Chaucer's female characters reflect the reality of medieval society. Women in his time were to be passive to their

fathers, husbands or Church. Supposed to behave as expected and with no vote in their fates, they did secretly, and rarely publicly, have their own contradictory thoughts about the matter. Although only three of the twenty-nine narrators are females, their tales describe a variety of medieval women's attitudes. All three of them use their tales as a reflection of themselves and sometimes, as a highlight of their virtues. The two nuns, controlled by the clergy, critique the patriarchal order by narrating stories which reveal their true ambitions and act as typical medieval nuns. The Prioress is a sentimental woman, who, although happy with her nun life, hungers for motherhood, a desire opposite to the one of The Second Nun's, who takes comfort in having avoided family responsibilities. Their opinions about men are similar, the first giving them little importance and, on a scale, placing them after mothers and children, and the second acknowledging that God is the only man who controls her life.

The Wife of Bath is probably Chaucer's most intricate and complex character. Admitting she represents a medieval wife, she is a wife who partly disobeys the rules of medieval society. Her voice expresses all the disadvantages women are presented with by men's hands. It is at first hard to believe that Chaucer, a medieval man, created such a complex character with such outrageous opinions for the era. But him doing this, not only demonstrates his ability of creating diverse characters even if not compatible with his own

believes, but also his exceptional and even feminist thinking uncommon for a medieval man. Nevertheless, while it is relatively impossible to know his truly intentions, it is highly safe to affirm that Chaucer expressed his own thoughts about women's position in society through Alison with the guarantee of having an excuse in the eyes of his contemporaries if ever asked if those were truly his beliefs; he could always blame a fictional character for such daring statements.

Many other female characters appear as part of the tales, such as a hen and a lady falcon. Fables are just fables, but always based on human behavior. If considered as human beings, the hen and lady falcon's nature do correspond to that of medieval women. One is a wife, despite that fact that she is less submissive to her husband, and the other is a woman abandoned by her lover and full of despair. Such women are trapped and restrained, in one way or another, by male authorities, thus credible.

The Canterbury Tales are a nourishment of one's curiosity. When the *Tales* were introduced to me, my interest in fourteen century literature heightened and awakened a hunger of exploring and appreciating its content. While every facet of this book is of an extreme relevance, the issue of women captivated my undivided attention. Knowing through literature how such women lived and witnessing their battle with subjugation, gave me a unique perspective, admiration and a desire of acting against this still

existing domination of women who suffer alike indignities all over the world.

Chaucer, a man belonging to the patriarchal medieval society, had a familiarity with the women's role in his society which allowed him to experiment with the feminine voice. Researchers approached different angles of his works since its publishing, and still, in the twenty-first century, scholars find new interpretations about his writings and characters when scrutinized. I believe *The Canterbury Tales* deserve further detailed examination to reveal other singular understandings of the Middle Ages.

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