

**Re-Interpretations of English.  
Essays on Language,  
Linguistics and Philology  
(II)**

I. Moskowich-Spiegel Fandiño & Begoña Crespo García (Eds.)

© By Isabel Sofía Moskowich - Spiegel Fandiño & Begoña Crespo García | 2005  
Edited by Universidade da Coruña

I.S.B.N.: 84-9749-127-0

Depósito Legal: C-1640-2005

Diseño Gráfico: Oceanográfico Publicidad

Printed in Spain

# The Discourse of Gender Violence in Middle English Literature: A socio-linguistic analysis of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

Dr. José Ramón Belda Medina & Sara Ponce Serrano

## 1. Introduction.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have been widely studied and analysed by many scholars (Ashton, 1998; Ellis, 1998; and Phillips, 2000) as they are an extraordinary portrayal of the English Middle Ages, depicting people from different social strata (knights, wives, clerks, nuns, kings, etc). Among all these studies, two aspects of *The Canterbury Tales* have received comparatively more attention: on the one hand, the symbolic illustration and narrative imagery of English medieval society (Olson, 1996; Mann, 1987; Knapp, 1990), on the other, feminist and antifeminist interpretations of some of the tales and the pilgrims (Wright, 1989; Butler, 1990; Ashton, 1998; Martin, 1990; Stephens and Ryans, 1998; Bissow, 1998). Occasionally, both aspects (English medieval society and gender relations) have been associated with a third aspect that will be the focus of our article, i.e., the representation of violence against women in medieval literature.

In this paper we will concentrate on the different representation of violence against women as reflected on some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Typically, several interpretations are possible when analysing Chaucer's work. In fact, some of the tales could be taken allegedly as a paradigm of the women's defence in some Middle English texts from a feminist perspective, especially

manifested in *The Wife of Bath*. However, our approach here will consider the most traditional perspective about the discourse of gender violence, without excluding other possible critical readings.

## **2. Medieval Women.**

As well attested by several scholars (Mate, 1999; Power, 1995) during the middle Ages, women were often perceived as second-class citizens with a low status both in the familiar and the social spheres. Most of them lived just to be married and have children after reaching puberty under the absolute and unquestionable control of their husbands. Thus, women were frequently defined in terms of their biological role, as “brides, wives and mothers”, in relation to men (Phillips, 2000: 25). Two are the possible sources for this traditional image about medieval women: the Church and the aristocracy. Both powerful institutions in the Middle Ages maintained women personally inhibited and socially restricted. The narrow cast of the aristocracy treated women “as an ornamental asset” always subject to men (Power, 1995: 14). But, it is in the Church where we find most of the archetypal ideas concerning women-men relations in the Middle Ages. The medieval interpretation of the Biblical tradition illustrated women as items of men’s property that should be always subjugated to their will.

In addition, clerical tradition polarized medieval women into two extreme positions; on the one hand, souls of supreme virtue and sacrifice, associated with the image of the Virgin Mary, on the other, creatures of extreme vice linked with the figure of Eve (Bisson, 1998). In fact, the Virgin Mary was one of the most representative images of womanhood in the middle Ages (Martin, 1990); her figure was of continuous subservience to men. But in the case of Eve, women were regarded as an instrument of the Devil, as temptresses who naturally lead man to the sin. As a result, medieval women were condemned to live under men’s authority, who had to repress women both because they needed to be subordinated to men as their Lords and also as a punishment for the sins of the first women, Eve.

### 3. Medieval Women in Literature. Chaucer's Portrayal of Women in *The Canterbury Tales*.

As a consequence of this twofold feminine image, most medieval literary works depicted female characters in relation to these polarized stereotypes based on the Christian tradition. Thus, as we are going to see, the dichotomy Virgin Mary / Eve historically related with the duality good / evil was the limited vision of women reflected in much of the medieval literature, including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Ferrante, 1975; Hornero, 1989; Weissman, 1991; Dela Cruz 1999).

Generally, a woman associated with the image of the Virgin Mary symbolized fidelity, obedience, submission and subjugation in eternal service but also subordination to men. This ideal image of women was a medieval social phenomenon for passiveness. Women's obedience to men, in this case, is rooted in medieval religious tradition; on the one hand, Christian obedience to God, obedience to something or someone superior, on the other, women's absolution service and subordination to their family (Knapp, 1990).

But, as we commented before, some of these literary works related also medieval women to the biblical figure of Eve and, consequently, women incarnated disobedience, sin and disloyalty to men, whether husbands, fathers or brothers. Obviously, this medieval conception was based on Eve who ate the apple disobeying God's will and tempted Adam to follow her. Hence medieval women were associated with all that was evil and corrupt.

Both medieval conceptions, women as the Virgin Mary and as Eve, are clearly reflected in Chaucer's stories which include many examples and evidences of the social attitude towards women at this time. Not surprisingly, the prevailing image is that of women as inferior objects of property as well as the origin of all sins.

In Chaucer's tales both images are clearly portrayed. Thus, the Virgin Mary can be related to characters such as Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale*, Emily in *The Knights' Tale* or Constance in *The Man of Law's Tales*, all of them depicted as servile, loyal and obedient. In contrast, the figure of Eve is present in such characters as the wife of Bath or May in *The Merchant's Tale*, all these women described as disloyal, immoral and corrupt, all related with sin.

#### 4. Violence against women in Medieval Literature.

##### *The Canterbury Tales.*

The Medieval power structure is present many literary works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and, therefore, women mistreatment is also reflected in the form of physical and psychological abuse. Among all types of abuse we will describe, rape is probably the most radical violent attack suffered by women (Brownmiller, 1975; Bashar, 1983; Estrich 1987). But, in medieval literature, we can find also other types of physical and psychological violence and *The Canterbury Tales* is a perfect illustration of most of them. As Weist (1998: 132) remarks "It [gender violence] exist on every level of analysis and observation, from the metaphoric to the marginal to the central". Traditionally, some authors referred to this gender violence with such misnomers as 'normalized violence'. According to Weisl 'normalized' means "violence against women naturalized by particular gendered constructs of heroism, nationalism or domestic space", i.e., violence that is portrayed or sometimes ignored as a 'normal' part of family live (Ferguson, 1989). This 'normalized violence' is, in the case of *The Canterbury Tales*, covert by the narrative genre of the story.

In fact, this normalized violence is shaped into different forms depending on the tale and the pilgrims. For this reason, we will follow hereon Weisl's (1998: 56) classification of the different tales in our analysis who distinguished three different genres:

- a) The fabliau, including where stories such as *The Miller's Tale* or *The Reeve's Tale*
- b) The romance, such as *The Knight's Tale*.
- c) And the holy tales, for example *The Physician's Tale* or *The Clerk's Tale*.

In each of these genres, violence against women appears in a wide variety of forms. Firstly, in the fabliau, violent attacks to women are usually hidden by a smoke screen of physical comedy as in *The Reeve's Tale* where the rape of the miller's daughter and women is covert by a comical situation. Secondly, in the romance, 'courtly love' is revealed as a male game of power, property and violence that involved the total submission of women to her

husband's will as in the case of *The Man of Law's Tale*. Finally, in holy tales such as *The Physician's Tale*, violence against women is not only justified but also valorised as a transcendent aura.

## 5. The Discourse of Gender Violence in *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Physician's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale* and *The Clerk's Tale*.

Gender violence in Chaucer's tales is sometimes hidden under the label of 'normalized violence' in the narrative of the stories. In *The Physician's Tale*, the argumentation overtly hides the cruel situation suffered by the female character, illustrating each violent act as a transcendental aura (Phillips, 2000: 26). Thus, Virginia dies in the hands of her own father because he prefers his daughter's death than her fall into the hands of a lecherous judge. So the father kills his daughter in order to preserve not only her own virtue but also his own shame. Examining the tale, we perceive how the discourse of Virginia's father and the narrative constructed suspiciously veil a discourse of gender violence. So, the reader reaches the conclusion that Virginia was killed because she was a beautiful woman, and so, she was an innocent victim of a sin she did not committed.

The narration starts with the description of Virginia presenting her as 'perfect' in all her qualities. In fact, she is the ideal medieval woman; 'lovely', 'virtuous' and 'excelling in beauty'. The narration draws our attention on the girl's qualities because, as we will see later, her merits are the cause of her death. Virginia's description as a woman of 'exceptional beauty' and as a 'treasure' in permanent watch by her father and her mother presents her as an object of temptation.

Part of the narration concentrates exclusively on Virginia's beauty, as an attempt to justify her fatal death, i.e., her beauty was "who captures and strikes the judge". We get the impression that Virginia's beauty is to blame for the judge's later despicable behaviour to take her "no matter what". From this point to the end of the tale, we observe how male characters associated with Virginia repeat a discourse of total control and violence against her. Once the

judge is “captured” by Virginia’s beauty, he decides to “won” her “*not bribery, nor violence*”. Concurrently, Virginia’s father also imposes on hers his own will on her, as he considers himself the owner of his daughter’s destiny, so he decides to take Virginia’s life and convert his daughter into martyr. Unfortunately, Virginia’s destiny is a fatal and apparently inevitable choice between death and dishonour.

‘Dogther’, quod he, ‘Virginia, by thy name,  
 Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame,  
 That thou ost suffer; allas, that I was bore!  
 For nevere thou deservedest wherefore  
 To dyen with a swerd or with a knyf.  
 O deere, dogther, endere of my lyf,  
 Which I have fostred up with swich pleasaunce  
 That thou were nevere out of my resembraunce!  
 O dogther, which that art my laste wo,  
 And in my lyf my laste joye also,  
 O gemme of chastitee, in pacience  
 Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence.  
 For love, and nat for hate, thou most be deed;  
 My pitous hand moot smyten of thyn heed.  
 Allas, that evere Apius the say!  
 Thus hath he falsly jugged the to-day’-  
 And tolde hire al the cas, as ye before  
 Han herd; nat nedeth for to telle it moore. (The Riverside, 1987: 192)

As we see in these lines describing the moment previous to Virginia’s beheading, several features illustrate how the justification of the tale covert the savage attack to her. The violent act is even reinforced through a certain type of language that describes the fact in full detail. The abundance of expressions about the father’s emotional affection for his daughter such as ‘you are the ender of my life’, ‘you were never once out of my thought’ or ‘your bringing-up has brought me such delight’, the regular repetition of the word ‘dear’ and dramatic exclamations such as ‘O my dear daughter’, ‘O germ of chastity’, give us the impression that we are actually witnessing a sanctification of a martyr virgin instead of a violent act. Meaningfully, although Virginia’s father commits a crime, he is not actually considered a killer, because as he says ‘It is love, not hate, will have you dead, my pitying hand that must strike off your head’, the impersonal tone of the sentence clears Virginia’s father for his sin as It was ‘love’ not him



'who kills her daughter'. In fact, the father is here presented as an innocent mediator of the act, with no other option left 'my pitying hand that must strike off your head'.

In the final dialogue among the Host, the Doctor and the Pardoner gender violence becomes fully explicit since Virginia is killed because, we are said, she represented a temptation to men:

Allas, to deere boughte she beautee!  
 Wherfore I seye al day that men may see  
 That yiftes of Fortune and of Nature  
 Been cause of deeth to many a creature.  
 Hire beautee was hire deth, I dar wel sayn. (The Riverside, 1987: 193)

However, imposed death was not always the only discourse of gender violence in Chaucer's work. Violent acts against women can also take the form of sexual violence. In *The Reeve's Tale* the aggression is mitigated by the humorous tone of the fabliau. The funny plot of vengeance and intellectual competition between the two students and the miller covers a chronicle about rape. The students take non-consensual sex from the miller's wife and daughter "as a vengeful exchange for the corn he was taken from them" (Phillips, 200: 117). The discourse of gender violence here comes from the linguistic treatment of a virtual rape as compensation for the stolen corn:

For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus:  
 That gif a man in a point be agreved,  
 That in another he sal be reveled.  
 Oure corn is stoln, sothly, it is na nay,  
 And we han had an il fit al this day;  
 And syn I sal have neen amendement  
 Agayn my los, I will have esement. (The Riverside, 1987: 82)

As we can observe, the discourse of one of the students presents women as a reward for an unpaid commercial exchange and considers the two women "as mere objects to be had, to be taken" (Weist, 1998: 120). Thus, wives, daughters and women in general are only possessions, something to 'have', to 'take', just like corn. As Weist points out "rape becomes a test of masculinity".

In addition to this, the narrator extends the degradation of the two women in describing the rape of the young girl as a ‘funny’ situation in which the student finds ‘a great joy’ and mitigates and even ignores the violent act ‘shorting’ that part of the tale in which it could be physical resistance to the rape by the girl declaring that:

Aleyn answered, ‘I counte hymn at a flyer.’  
 And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.  
 This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,  
 Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,  
 That it had been to late for to crie,  
 And shortly for to seyn, they were aton.  
 Now pley, Aleyn, for I wol speke of John. (The Riverside, 1987: 82)

The narration of the facts maintains the same tone of humiliation for both women when the narrator claims that the two of them, daughter and wife, actually enjoyed with their rapists. If, as we can verify in reading the tale, sex comes to both mother and daughter as a complete surprise, the affirmation that ‘It’s years since she [the miller’s wife] had had so good a bout, for the thrusts like a madman, hard and deep’ seems to confirm that ‘the supposed women’s enjoyment’ is one of the oldest male excuses to clear men from the violent act:

Withinne a while this John the clerk up leep,  
 And on this goode wyf he Leith on soore.  
 So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore;  
 He priketh harde and depe as he were mad.  
 This joly lyf han thise two clerkes lad  
 Til that the thridde cok bigan to singe. ( The Riverside, 1987: 83)

While the two previous stories include physical violence, in *The Clerk’s Tale* we discover a woman emotionally tortured by her husband beneath a story of a perfect marriage. The whole narration of the tale seems to be a reaffirmation of male power. Gender violence in this case comes from the tension between two kinds of medieval male power; firstly, the tyranny vision of marriage, and secondly, the image of women as eternal sufferers that must be subject to their husbands’ wills.

In this tale Griselda's husband tries to prove her wife's loyalty and obedience by taking away her two children and pretending to murder them. So, he sends Griselda away when he decides to take another woman and, finally, calls Griselda back to set up the castle for his new wife. The narrative here turns into a discourse of gender violence with two prevailing ideas through the whole story: the image of marriage as an institution of men domination and the idea of violence against women as male reaffirmation of power.

Soon in the story the narration sets Griselda as a victim of male power; her fate is into the hands of her father and her future husband. The narration of the tale reveals a discourse of gender violence based on a patriarchal society in which women have no choice about her fate and their opinions have no value at all:

'Grisilde', he seyde, 'ye shal wel understonde  
It liketh to youre fader and to me  
That I yow wedde, and eek it may so stonde,  
As I suppose, ye wol that it so be.  
But thise demandes axe I first,' quod he,  
'That, sith it shal be doon in hastif wyse,  
Wol ye assente, or , elles yow avyse?  
'I seye this: be ye redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I freely may,  
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
And nevere ye grucche it, nyght, ne day?  
And eek whan I sey 'ye', ne sey nat 'nay',  
Neither by word ne frowning contenance?  
Swere this, and here I swere oure alliance.' (The Riverside, 1987: 141-142)

Some expressions such as 'you must understand' and 'It seems good to your father and to me' quoted by the marquis at the beginning of these stanzas give us the impression that Griselda's future has been totally decided, and she, as a woman, 'must' accept her father's and her future husband's will under no conditions or complains. As the marquis continues his despotic discourse, his speech reveals the medieval conception of marriage, i.e., 'domination, but not servitude' as described in the beginning of the tale. The tone of the passage is dictatorial, repressive and tyrannical. Discourse of gender violence comes, in this

case, from imperative expressions such as 'submit to my will', 'you will not murmur', 'To my 'Yes' you do not answer 'Nay' that makes Griselda invisible as a person and subordinated to her husband opinions 'either by word or frowning countenance'.

## **6. Conclusions.**

Although Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have been the object of different critical interpretation and reviews, the discourse of gender violence is that of the English medieval society. According to the religious tradition, women were stereotyped into two different and opposed categories: the martyr and the sinner. On the one hand, the martyr female character is modelled after the Virgin Mary and her destiny is ideally and consciously subordinated to the husband's will. On the other, the female sinner who are evil representations of Biblical Eve. Both female types suffer from gender violence, which can take the form of physical (rape, punishment) or physiological (humiliation, condemnation) attacks. No denounce is ever made throughout Chaucer's work about men's excesses since male aggressions to women seems always innocent or justified. Thus, there seems to be always a reason for gender violence, whether women's virtues or sins (overt violence), in the stories and when some type of declaration could be done from a female perspective it is immediately censored by the silence of the narrative (covert violence). As Isabel de la Cruz (1999: 265) concludes "El silencio en la literatura medieval se hace sinónimo de obediencia". In sum, the stories included in Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* may perfectly serve as a clear illustration of the discourse of gender violence in all its forms that prevailed in English medieval society.

## References

- Ashton, G. 1998. *Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales*. London: MacMillan P.
- Bashar, N. 1983. Rape in England between 1550 and 1700. The Sexual Dynamics of History. London Feminist History Group 28-42. London: Pluto P.
- Bissow, L. M. 1998. *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*. London: MacMillan P.
- Brooke, G. ed. 1992. *Women in the Biblical Tradition*. United Kingdom: The Edwin Mellen P.
- Brownmiller, S. 1975. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- De la Cruz Cabanillas, I. 1999. Estereotipos femeninos y sexismo en The Canterbury Tales. In Fernández de la Torre, M. D. et al. *El sexismo en el lenguaje*. Málaga: Servicio de Publicaciones, pp.261-270.
- Dinshaw, C. 1989. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin P.
- Ellis, S. ed. 1998. *Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales*. New York: Longman.
- Estrich, S. 1987. *Real Rape*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Evans, R. and Lesley J. eds. 1994. *Feminist readings in Middle English literature: the Wife of Bath and all her sect*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Ferrante, J. 1975. *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature, From the twelfth century to Dante*. New York: Columbia P.
- Fisher, Sh. and Halley, J. eds. 1989. *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in feminist Contextual Criticism*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee P.
- Hansen, E. 1992. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. UCLA: UCP.
- Hornero Corisco, A. 1989. An Overall Image of Women in Ancrene Riwe and the Catherine Group. In Shaw, Patricia et al. eds. *Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de la Lengua y Literatura Inglesa Medieval (S.E.L.I.M.)*. Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, pp. 155-165.
- Knapp, P. 1990. *Chaucer and the Social Context*. New York: Roudledge
- Mann, J. 1987. *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*. Great Britain: CUP
- Martin, P. 1990. *Chaucer's Women*. London: MacMillan P.
- Mate, M.T. (1999): *Women in the Medieval English Society*. United Kingdom: CUP.
- Olson, P. 1986. *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*. Princeton UP.
- Phillips, H. 2000. *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales*. New York: St. Martin's P.

- Power, E. 1995. *Medieval Women*. United Kingdom: CUP.
- Selvidge, M.J. 1996. *Woman, Violence and the Bible*. United Kingdom: Edwin Mellen P.
- Stephens, J. and Ryan, M. 1998. Metafictional Strategies and the Theme of Sexual Power in the Wife of Bath's and Franklin's Tales. In Ellis, S. 1992. *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. London: Longman.
- Weissman, H. 1991. Antifeminism and Chaucer's characterization of women. In Andrew, Malcolm ed. *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Milton Keynes: Open University (111-25)
- Weist, A. J. 1998. Quitting' Eve: Violence against Women in the Canterbury Tales. In Roberts, A. 1998. *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*. United States of America: California U.P (243-258)
- Wright, D. 1989. *Geoffrey Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales*. New York: OUP.