

Female Voice in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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Abstract

In *The Canterbury Tales*, supposedly a collection of tales told by a group of pilgrims on their way to the Canterbury Cathedral, Geoffrey Chaucer tries to present a cross-section of the medieval society which is essentially male-dominated. In addition to the inclusion of members from the distinct social estates: the nobility, the clergy and the laborers, Chaucer allows three female pilgrims to take part in the story-telling competition. In most medieval male discourses, women are in inferior positions and are defined in their relations to men. They are either praised for their physical beauty or their virginity, or reviled as temptresses who could ruin men. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer takes the unprecedented action in experimenting with female voice. By giving striking personalities to the three female pilgrims/tale-tellers—namely the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun—and by allowing them voice for self-representation, Chaucer challenges various discourses surrounding femininity. The inclusion of female voice not only shows women's autonomy but also challenges and questions the legitimacy of male domination and female subordination.

Keywords: Chaucer, female voice, *The Canterbury Tales*

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In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer provides a vivid description of a great variety of characters in two different ways: first by the central narrator's portraits of each pilgrim in the General Prologue and second by the tales told by each pilgrim. These pilgrims represent a cross-section of the medieval society. Members of the medieval society are generally divided into three groups, or estates: the nobility, the clergy and the laborers. Taken together, the pilgrims reveal a great part of the social structure of late medieval England with the exclusion of the highest social classes, who would never travel with such group of chance acquaintances. The diverse characterizations also reveal one of Chaucer's aims—to present a portrait of a rounded society. The society Chaucer portrays has room for both bad and good characters, for corruptions and abuses, and, on few occasions, for an ideal standard of behavior upheld by the social order and Christian ethical system. However, most significant of all, Chaucer includes among the predominantly male pilgrims three female characters—the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun—who are given the chance to take part in the storytelling competition.

The medieval society was no doubt a male-dominated society. Compared with men, women were supposed to be passive and inferior. Ruth Mohl's research shows that the medieval women generally “must be kept out of all public office. They must devote themselves to their feminine and domestic occupations” (341). In most medieval chronicles and literature, women's active participation in history was nowhere to be found while the praise of women who were passive ornaments or objects of male exchange were abundant. Eileen Powers in her *Medieval Woman* observes: “The ideas about women were formed on the one hand by the clerkly order, usually celibate, and on the other hand by a narrow caste” (9). Anne Laskaya shares similar opinion: “The medieval ideals prescribed for women and preserved in the discourses of law, religion, and literature grew out of two sources—the Church and the aristocracy, both bastions of male power” (31). What determined a woman's position was her sex. Women were perceived as physical objects, as bodies. Susan Crane notes that the medieval women were “alienated from the ideal of an interdependent society in that their sexuality tend[ed] to stand in for any socioeconomic function in defining them” (98). According to the male discourses, women were either praised for their physical beauty or virginity or reviled as temptresses who could ruin men. Since women were thought to be far more controlled by their bodies, “a woman's triumph over her body was seen as heroic” (Laskaya 34). Women's duties included obedience, chaste behavior, care for husbands and spinning or cloth-making. Shulamith Shahar, after reviewing many medieval documents, concludes that “chastity appears as the most important trait of all women” (109).

Almost all female characters were identified as either chaste or unchaste. Within the patriarchal social structure, good women were women who guarded their wombs so that men's legitimate offspring could be guaranteed. In addition to this most admirable trait, another virtue every medieval woman needed to cultivate was obedience; that is, in no way were women to assert themselves as equals to men. They were to recognize, accept and uphold male sovereignty. Women who stepped beyond proper roles prescribed by the society were called "mannish" or labeled "viragos" and were severely chastised. Role-refusal was met by violent responses, as in the trial of Joan of Arc. This dependency and self-abnegation, according to Laskaya, were structured "not only by a code of womanly obedience, but also by a code which encourage them to cultivate silence" (40). Actually women's silence was part of the feminine ideal. Women's words were dangerous so that they were taught to fear speaking too much. This demand of silence was further reinforced by negative caricatures of women as chattering, gossiping animals. Regulating who spoke became crucial for those who wanted to possess power. To reduce a woman to silence was to reduce her to powerlessness and, thus, to guarantee men's sovereignty. The feminine prescription of subordination, virginity, obedience, and silent acceptance achieved its zenith in the Virgin Mary. She was the self-sacrificing, long suffering and nurturing mother. She was the most prominent model of femininity.

Since men are assumed to govern, in medieval male discourses the most crucial demand for women is how to conform to the male sovereignty, or, in other words, how to submit to male dominance. This is mainly the picture of how most women are represented by men in *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of voices in which male voices take great precedence. The representation of women in most cases is doubly filtered: through Chaucer the writer and through the storytellers. Under such circumstances, the representations of women are most of the time static, stereotypical, and biased. Good and virtuous women are the silent, obedient and self-sacrificing ones, such as Emylie in the Knight's Tale, Custance in the Man of Law's Tale, and Gresilde in the Clerk's Tale. They are passive ornaments or objects of men's exchange and exhibit the ideal feminine response to adversity: acceptance, silence, patience, and piety. Bad and wicked women are those who violate or threaten the codified ideals men impose upon them and are consequently ridiculed flagrantly, such as Alisoun in the Miller's Tale and May in the Merchant's Tale. In almost every case in male narratives, women are in inferior positions and are defined in their relation to men. The Tale of Melibee is the only exception in which Chaucer's persona attempts a female perspective by means of the characterization of Prudence. However, the female perspective shown there, instead of serving to prove women's autonomy, is

so carefully constructed as to uphold man's sovereignty. Since the representations of women are articulated by male voices and perspectives, we have little chance to know what women really think about the outside world and what they think about themselves. Against this hostile and unfavorable representations of women, Chaucer allows three women their voices, or, in Laskaya's words, "takes on the masquerade of the female voice" in the Second Nun's Tale, the Prioress's Tale, the Wife of Bath's Tale (166).² Before we attempt an elucidation of Chaucer's intention and purpose behind this endeavor, let us first look into these three tales and their prologues to see what they tell about women that is missing in or contradictory to men's tales.

Among these three female storytellers, two belong to the religious orders: the Prioress and the Second Nun. The presence of the two nuns reflects a very popular way of dealing with the female body in the Middle Ages. It was an almost established custom in large or well-to-do families to send one or more daughters to become nuns, a situation manifested in a popular proverb of the time: "a woman ought to have either a husband or a wall."³ Usually if "a wall" was chosen for one of their daughters, the aristocratic or rich fathers would make provision to assign the girls' dowries for a marriage to Christ. These girls, very young in most cases, were warmly accepted by the nunnery because of the subsequent financial support. Among these young girls, some took the veil of their own will and out of a strong religious vocation and were dedicated to the glorification of God's love. However, there were also a great number of young girls forced into the nunnery for social, economical, or political reasons. They are often unable to adapt themselves to the religious life, a situation that helped form one of the stock characters of the so-called the Wayward Nun.⁴ As Daichman has noted, "intended originally as the enclaves of peace and devotion during one of the most turbulent periods of mankind," the medieval convents as well as the Church were torn by inner struggles. The social, political, and economic forces at work in society affected life in the nunnery, "casting together the young and the old, the saintly and the sinful" (30). The two religious female storytellers seem to offer the reader exactly these two diverse aspects of life in the nunnery.

The portrait of the Prioress seems at first to represent an ideal of virginity devoted to a life of piety: she sings the prayers beautifully, and she wears various

² Laskaya argues that even though Chaucer's move in these three tales is closer to a female perspective, they are still represented through male perception except through "fewer filters." 166-67.

³ "*Aut virum aut murum oportet mulierem habere.*" Jean Baptiste Thiers, *Traite de la Cloture des Religieuses* (Paris: Chez Antoine Dezallier, 1681). Quoted in Powers, p. 342, n. 3.

⁴ According to G. G. Coulton, some girls were forced by relatives, either out of a genuine desire to protect them or merely to dispose them, to enter the convent: "Daughters of noble families [were] dumped into a convent because the medieval world had no other place for them" (126).

attributes of the religious life. However the description is made ambiguous by various allusions to her secular female qualities. Her worldliness and vanity are implied by references to her clothing, table manners, and courtly behavior. Her feminine charms receive more emphasis than does her celibacy. She has the most unlikely name—Madame Eglentyne, a name which is associated more with the medieval romance than with the spiritual world of Christianity. Robert O. Payne's questions may serve as a summary of the readers' conflicting attitudes toward the Prioress:

Is the Prioress a sentimental, vain, worldly woman, or a tenderhearted religious trying to do everything as beautifully as possible in the service of the Lord? Or is she the former, trying hard and sometimes successfully to be the latter?⁵

Moreover, judged by the Benedictine Rule governing the monastic life in the Middle Ages, some of her behaviors could be termed misconducts. The most serious one is her presence in the pilgrimage. Even though the medieval abbess enjoyed incredible freedom of movement, there was very strict rule governing the nuns' leaving the territory of the convent: "the duration of absence was to be regulated by the circumstance of the case and the command of the Prioress" (Hugo 63). There was also an edict issued by the bishop of Ramsey: "No nun is to go out except in staid company, nor is she to stay with secular folk beyond three days" (84). The pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral would take her longer than she would have been allowed. It seems not only seems preposterous but also unlikely for the Prioress, who is supposed to lead other nuns and to provide role model for her followers.⁶ In addition, she uses "ooth" frequently while the church rule urges the nuns not to swear. She has very good table manners, a refinement hardly expected in a religious woman, and her indulgence in the ritual of eating violates another precept of the rule to avoid the sin of gluttony closely related with lust. Aloof from religious concern, the Prioress takes great delight in the worldliness, including her coy "smylyng," her "amyable port," her courtly name, her punctilious manners, her fashionable attire more suitable to a courtly lady than a nun, and her wearing of a coral brooch (which is also against the rule of wearing rings or brooches) with an ambiguous "A" (after *Amor vincit omnia*, "Love conquers all").

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar

⁵ Robert O. Payne, *Geoffrey Chaucer*. In *Twayne's English Authors Series Online* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997), Chapter 7.

⁶ According to Arthur Sherbo's calculation, the trip from the presumed nunnery of Stratford atte Bowe and the Canterbury Cathedral must have taken at least twelve days, three to four days with three overnight stops or three days with two overnight stops; in addition to the three days on the road, there would be one or two days in Canterbury, three days to return to Southwark, and then four days round trip to and from Southwark to Stratford (244).

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, 158-162)

The coral brooch and its courtly motto not only shows the Prioress's desire to make herself more attractive to men but also indicates her yearning to conform to the courtly tradition. Her physical charms and her mundane bent as well as her clothes and ornaments are all signs not of inner religious devotion but of worldly pleasure.

Having to live the life a religious nun but trying to live that of a courtly lady, the Prioress is eventually unfit for either role. As a nun, her appearance and behavior are marked by disobedience and overindulgence. Her mimetic and masquerading life as a noble lady also seems incongruous to her status as a nun. All her features serve to represent her as the profligate nun who is not only unwilling to observe the Benedictine triad—obedience, claustration, and poverty—but also liable to fall victim to moral depravity. Madame Eglentyne simply does not fit the cultural code that would establish her as a religious woman.

The tale she tells belongs to one of the popular medieval story types, the *legenda* or saint's life, focusing on the martyrdom of a holy child. The tale also serves to exemplify the "miracle of the Virgin" through which Christ's mother, Mary, intercedes in human events at moments of crisis. Therefore the tale exalts both the holiness of the child-saint and the motherly love and concern of the Virgin Mary. A tale of the *legenda* would fit very properly the status of the Prioress—a religious person telling a religious tale to glorify a supreme female and nurturing guide, the Virgin Mary. The tale, however, also reflects very tellingly a combination of sentimentality, cruelty and protest. Its tension between cruelty and pathos, its focus on maternal feelings exemplified in the Virgin Mary, and the vulnerability of a life in a hostile world all can be seen as expressions of the Prioress's complex and conflicting personality.

A strong resemblance between the teller and her character is revealed in the Prioress's prayer in her prologue:

My konnyng is so wayk, o blissful Queene,
For to declare thy grete worthynesse
That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;

But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,
That kan unnethes any word expresse,
Right so fare I, and therefore I yow preye,
Gydeth my song that I shal of you seye. (VII, 481-87)

Here the Prioress not only sees herself as the holy child but also sings like him. How do we relate the Prioress to her little clergeoun who is murdered and thrown away, singing over and over again with a cut throat? Robert Hanning suggests that “the Prioress’ s treatment of her lapdogs, her sympathy for trapped mice, dead or bleeding suggests an identification with small, helpless things, trapped and punished in a world ruled by men” (588). Hanning further notes that “within the shell of extraversion and schooled, courtly competence that this large and successful woman has carefully constructed there exists a frighteningly different self-image: an imprisoned, helpless creature, vulnerable to men who would menace or tyrannize her” (588-89). Although the Prioress is the head of a convent, she is still constantly at the mercy of higher church authorities. Daichman confirms that because of the increasing instances of misconduct in the nunnery of the Middle Ages, Episcopal visitations were conducted and were followed by investigations. An abbess remained in office for life but would be removed if transgressions were uncovered. The Prioress whose devotion to worldly affairs takes precedence over her religious concerns would certainly be an easy target for church prosecution.

Seen as the Prioress’ s self-representation, the tale certainly reveals some hidden truth about the Prioress herself. Living in the convent, she is actually as innocent as the male child. Just like the child who sings without intellectual understanding, she lives a religious life, which she is unable to live up to. The meaning of the boy’ s singing, as Helen Philip notes, lies in his “virtually pre-verbal, bodily, grasp of the works he sings, which constitute an unsurpassable laude” (169). But while filtered through the storyteller’ s mind, the Prioress’ s song denotes the pathos of an elegy, lamenting her forced lot of a religious life which she is totally unfit for. The child’ s singing with a cut throat parallels her ineffectual craving for the worldliness. By telling the tale of a child martyr, the Prioress indirectly tells her tale of a reverse martyr who sacrifices a secular life but does not obtain heavenly bliss in return. Instead, she lives in a state of living death like the child.

Similar to the Prioress, the Second Nun also represents one of the two token women in the Middle Ages—the religious / the virgin. The Second Nun is the Prioress’ s companion, her “chapeleyne,” meaning secretary or assistant, her

second-in-command in running the nunnery (I, 163-4). However, unlike the Prioress whose appearance and manners are shown in minute details in the General Prologue, the Second Nun is never given any description at all. The reader's understanding of her is unmediated by other narrative filters; instead, the image of the Second Nun unravels itself through the nun's own discourse. Our first knowledge about the Second Nun is from her prologue which is composed of three parts—the sermon on idleness, a prayer to the Virgin Mary, and an interpretation of the heroine's name in her tale. These three themes are integrated into a divine purpose and firmly establish the tale within the world of the convent, as Margaret Hallissy remarks, “like three separate threads lightly joined to each other and to the main body of the tapestry” (259). We also learn from her prologue that the tale she tells is from a translation and is offered as a labor of “faithful bisynesse,” dutiful and faith-inspired service (VIII, 25).

The Second Nun's Tale is a *legenda* about the life of St. Cecilia. The chief virtue the story stresses is female virginity, and the major tension of the story is how the virgin defends it. The Second Nun tells the audience that since Cecilia's childhood,

She never cessed, as I written fynde,

Of hir preyere and God to love and drede,

Bisekyng hym to kepe hir maydenhede. (VIII, 124-26)

Even at her wedding, she still prays to God that her virginity may be preserved: “O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye / Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be” (VIII, 136-37). Unlike many stereotypical female characters who suffer because of their loss of virginity, St. Cecilia guards her chastity through her own will. Her crisis comes from an arranged marriage. Instead of succumbing to patriarchal authority and silently accepting her fate like Custance and Emylie, she resorts to the power of language and miracle through which she successfully converts her husband and her brother-in-law and finally retains her celibacy. Another important theme closely connected with the idea of female virginity is to increase and enlarge. Instead of the selfish aim of enlarging the family progeny by procreation, the story celebrates Cecilia's spiritual enlargement of her religious community. According to Hallissy, this inversion of human fertilization emphasizes a key concept—“spiritual products are better than those of the flesh; chastity is more truly generative than is sexuality” (262).

In addition, unlike the obedient and compliant female characters in the male narratives, St. Cecilia speaks out and, more importantly, her words shape the course of the event. The Second Nun focuses on St. Cecilia's words rather than her action. Through her words, St. Cecilia guides many men to Christianity. When she is brought

before Almachius, the prefect, because of the power of her voice, she defends herself eloquently:

Youre might . . . ful litel is to dreede,
For every mortal mannes powers nys
But lyk a bladder ful of wynd, ywys.
For with a nedles point, whan it is blowe,
May al the boost of it be leyd ful lowe. (VIII, 437-441)

Almachius is angered at her open defiance and accuses her of “answering so rudely” (432). What Almachius sees as unacceptable and repulsive in her is that compared with the standard of deferential and placating speech encouraged in medieval women, St. Cecilia’s behavior is unconventional and, therefore, unladylike. St. Cecilia’s unladylike rebelliousness is made more prominent by other terms Almachius uses to criticize her: “proud” and “bold.” To Almachius—the spokesman of the male-dominated society, St. Cecilia’s most intolerable crime is that she simply will not obey, an act which poses a detrimental threat to the established social structure.

The portrait of such dedicated, strong-willed and outspoken woman challenges and subverts the definition of ideal woman in the tales told by the male storytellers.

Contradictory to the general male perception of women, St. Cecilia insists on living a life not determined by her sex but by her religious faith. St. Cecilia demonstrates absolute conformity to the heavenly authority but inflexible disobedience to the earthly authorities. She defies patriarchal authority, redefines her marriage, and confronts secular authority. Moreover her suffering is not described with the language of pathos. Her calm cheerfulness stands out in contrast with the weepy and piteous women in distress. In this way, she is a bold rebel against the assumptions about women’s weakness and inferior status as well as their subjection to their husbands. Finally, she executes her strong will by making a positive decision to become a nun. Thus, she represents a religious resolution, “an apotheosis,” (Philip 201) which serves as a great contrast to the counterfeited vocation of the Prioress and the “cautiously influential figure” of Prudence (Laskaya 171). Quite unusual in medieval delineations of male-female relationship, St. Cecilia’s moral authority is not contested by her male associates. There is companionable, brotherly and sisterly harmony among the members the Christian group. In many respects, St. Cecilia contradicts and transcends stereotypical social expectations of women. As Knapp

points out, her story depicts “almost a Golden Age myth of female defiance of oppression, female effectiveness and intellectual authority, and harmony between the sexes” (112-13).

Similarly defiant and outspoken is the Wife of Bath. Moreover, she embodies most of the faults for which the medieval patriarchal authors condemned women. Medieval women were believed to be less rational than men and to be more sensual, earthly, and materialistic. In her prologue, the Wife of Bath represents herself as an earthly woman driven by a combination of economic necessity, pride, impulse, and animal instinct. She is outspoken on the tricks of love and marriage. As her portrait in the General Prologue indicates, she has been married five times. To have been married five times and to be eager for the sixth marriage confirms that she is sensual and spiritually inferior by the medieval standard. However, she quite openly accepts her sexuality and boldly claims that she was born under the sign of Venus and is therefore fated to be fleshly. Extroverted in manners and assertive in speech, she exemplifies all the faults men have attributed to women: the inclination to be bold, the propensity to argue, the desire for freedom and autonomy. As she asserts audaciously,

For certes, I am al Venerien

In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.

Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,

And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse. (III, 609-12)

She rejects almost all the ideal female characteristics prescribed by men, who constantly demand women to be restrained, passive, quiet, chaste, and obedient. All her propensities and rebellions make her a bad woman in accordance with the medieval patriarchal ideas.

The Wife of Bath's most telling argument is clearly stated in the opening lines of her lengthy prologue:

Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, is right ynough for me

To speke of wo that is in marriage. (III, 1-3)

She weighs experience over authority and she intends to substantiate her argument with the issue of marriage. She unhesitatingly points out the conflicts between experience and authority as well as between the sexes. In her declaration, the

battle she wages is not only against the powerful cultural discourses that value virginal women above all others, but also against the whole medieval “auctoritee.” “Auctoritee” means both social authority and the authority of books written by ancient authors. It is also a body of knowledge generally considered certain, complete, and unquestionable. Since those authors are men on the whole, to the Wife of Bath “auctoritee” equals male domination. Authority accords men with power to control women through books.

The first challenge she poses against authority appears in the General Prologue where her flamboyant array, according to the medieval authority, is not fit for women past forty, not to mention for a widow. Neither does her demeanor meet the requirements of widowhood. The most significant violation of the codified ideals is her attitude towards marriage. She combines her experience with her eloquence to upset the medieval authorial concept about marriage and about the relationship between married couples. In her prologue, we learn that she outlives five husbands, three old ones and two young ones. This behavior is counter to the advice given to the medieval widows who are normally requested to spend the rest of their lives in mourning. More shockingly, she claims that by means of the five marriages, obviously surpassed by no one, she gains a kind of perfection in handling her spouses and becomes an authority on the institution of marriage:

Diverse scoles maken prafyt clerkes,
 And diverse practyk in many sundry werkes
 Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;
 Of five husbondes scolei yng am I. (III, 44c-44f)

From her unsurpassed experience in marriage, the Wife of Bath offers her authoritative conclusion that marriage is not about love but about sex, money, and power. Enthusiastic about sex, she is also capable of using sex in marriage as a weapon. She controls her husbands, the old ones especially, by two maneuvers—by demanding sex and by withholding it—through both of which she achieves dominance over them. More often than not, her sexual relationship with her husbands is also reduced to monetary transaction:

I wolde no lenger in the bed adyde,
 If that I felte his arm over my side,
 Til he had maad his raunson unto me;

Thanne wolde I suffer hym do his nycetee. (III, 409-412)

In the General Prologue, the reader gets the impression that she earns her living by textile work. However, from her tale we learn that she derives her wealth from her husbands by means of spinning—a talent native to her womanhood: “Deciete, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To women kyndely, whyl that they may lyve” (III 401-2). Textile work in this context is only a gendered trait rather than a profession. She calls her first three old husbands good husbands because at church door they hand over their land and their treasure, pay money to have sex, and die leaving her their possessions. Therefore, against medieval authoritative concept about marriage, she turns marriage into a vehicle for her to maintain and increase power and money. Her explicit sexuality, her belief in sexual freedom and her manipulation of marital sex are in flagrant opposition to the ideal medieval wife who is supposed to be selfless, loving, and devoted to her husband.

The Wife of Bath is also marked by extraordinary intelligence and eloquence which again subvert the medieval tradition that women should be ignorant and silent. The Wife of Bath is a verbally aggressive woman. In her long prologue, she brags of how she complains first and starts a war in her marriages. She shows how she can turn accusations against women into arguments against men. She is able to devise a series of rapid attacks and accusations so that her husbands are unable to respond. She boasts that no men can “swere and lyen” half as well as women can, and she takes great delight in the prospect of deceiving men. Moreover, she seems to be familiar with the old misogynistic sayings and beliefs about women and knows how to turn the “auctoritee” to her advantage. For example, in citing the story of a Samaritan woman in the Bible, the Wife gives her aberrant reading of the scripture. When Jesus asks about the Samaritan woman’s husband, she answers that she has no husband. Jesus reproves her: “For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly” (John 4:18). However, the Wife of Bath treats this incident in a very casuistic way:

What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;

But that I axe, why that the fifthe man

Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?

How manye myghte she have in marriage?

Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age

Upon this nombre diffinicoun. (III, 20-25)

She calls into question the accepted church teaching of prohibition against remarriage and interprets it for herself. Like sex and money, argumentation is another way for her to defy authority and to gain power.

The tale told by the Wife of Bath is a short Arthurian romance in which a knight violates a maiden, is temporarily saved by the queen, and is eventually pardoned because he answers the question—"What thyng is it that women moost desiren?"—satisfactorily with the help of an old hag (905). This question and its answer serve as the central idea that the Wife of Bath tries to convey throughout her tale. The answer to the question is "masterie." The tale is again about sex and power. Like the Wife who ends her fight with Jankyn with a voluntary submissiveness in spite of her claim that women should have the upper hand in marriage, the hag in the tale, after having won the "masterie," becomes obedient to her husband. The tale points out that the husband must abandon mastery first before his wife can fulfill his every wish. In the tale, King Arthur grants his wife the right to sentence the rapist but this power is only temporarily ceded by the King. Therefore the power given to the queen is kept within the structure of masculine dominance. Like the prologue, the tale ends with a kind of surprise that seems to undermine the arguments the Wife upholds in her long monologue. The tale starts with a conflict and ends with a resolution through the voluntary abnegation of rights by the female and seems to reestablish the male domination. Therefore, it leads Laskaya to conclude that the tale "challenges the culture's gender prescriptions, and yet, it also reinscribes them" (184).

However, we should keep in mind that the key concept of the Wife's prologue is to value experience over authority. The young knight has finally learned about what women really desire not from books (authority) but from real experiences and from the old hag's speech. Through his education by experience and by listening to women, the young knight has truly completed his journey to male maturity. What the tale really tries to endorse about the subject of women is that knowledge in books is flawed because books are mainly written by men. As she protests vigorously,

By God, if women hadde written stories,
 As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
 They wolde han written of men moore wickedness
 Than al the mark of Adam may redress. (III, 693-96)

In order to understand women, the only authority is women themselves. This is the central message the tale intends to convey through the ordeal of the young knight:

only by listening to women and learning from female experiences can men fully understand what women really think and what they really want.

Pilgrimage was one of the popular endeavors in the Middle Ages. It was made to fulfill a vow as in cases of illness or of great peril or in expiation of sins. The lure of the road and the possibility of seeing other places attracted many English pilgrims. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is built upon such a popular medieval practice. The pilgrims employed by Chaucer are not a matter of chance. On the contrary, they are handpicked by the author to present a portrait of a rounded society, that is, a society as encompassing as possible. The medieval passion for order encourages people to think in terms of hierarchy. In both religious life and secular life, individuals are situated according to *estat, degree, or condicioun*: a place of one's own in a preordained and static hierarchy. Of the male pilgrims, Chaucer carefully chooses those as to represent the three medieval *estats*: the nobility (the Knight and the Squire), the clergy (the Parson, the Pardoner, and so on), and the professional (the Man of Law, the Franklin, and the Physician). To make any society complete, however, we need both sexes. Therefore, the inclusion of the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun shows that women are indispensable constituents of any rounded society. However, the inclusion of the female storytellers does seem problematic in several respects. First of all, of the three *estats*, only women from two *estats* are represented: two from the religious—the Prioress and the Second Nun, and one from the professionals—the Wife of Bath, who is involved in cloth trade. If the cast of the pilgrimage is meant to reflect a rounded society, apparently the portrait of the female community is insufficient. The second problem is: why does Chaucer choose the Prioress and the Second Nun? Their presence in the pilgrimage is not only improper but also very unlikely under the medieval convent law. As mentioned above, there was a very strict rule governing the movement of the nuns. Though accompanied by the nun's priest, it was still unthinkable for the nuns to leave the convent for such a long time. Thirdly, the characterizations of the Prioress and the Wife of Bath fit the medieval stock characters of the Wayward Nun and the Disobedient Wife. They belong to the category of bad women. The Second Nun is by the medieval standard a good woman but she tells a tale of an unconventional strong-willed woman. What is Chaucer's real intention by the inclusion of such female storytellers?

After identifying and examining the lives of five medieval women, Michael M. Sheehan distinguishes five groups of women within the three estates: the landed and free (Dorigen, the wife of the Yeoman), the citizens of the town (the Wife of Bath),

the women of peasantry (the wife of the Ploughman), the women of lowly estate living in the towns (the nameless women in the background of the Cook's Tale), and the religious.⁷ Among the five categories, three of them appear as characters in male narratives and only two of them get to have their voices heard in *The Canterbury Tales*. To find a feasible reason why only representatives from two female groups are picked to join a pilgrimage composed predominately of male pilgrims, we need first to look into the structuring device of *The Canterbury Tales*. One important unifying principle of *The Canterbury Tales* is the storytelling game. Storytelling is an activity that requires certain skill and learning or, in one simple word, education. Even though the reader is aware that Chaucer the sophisticated writer is the ventriloquist behind all his tales, by adopting the simple pose of the naive observer Chaucer allows the pilgrims to reveal themselves through their own voices. To be able to have the kind of education to tell a tale is not an opportunity given to medieval women in general. We may assume that the first two groups and the religious group would have the chance to be educated. Since it is not possible for noble ladies to take part in a pilgrimage like this, the choice is limited down to two—the women whose families provided the free burgesses like the Prioress and the Second Nun and the citizens of the town like the Wife of Bath. The Prioress and the Second Nun are undoubtedly educated because of their leading positions in the nunnery. The Wife of Bath is obviously knowledgeable, probably only sparingly, because in her long monologue she demonstrates that she is familiar with the old books, though aberrantly at times, and she can understand the misogynistic book Jankyn reads. Therefore, the inclusion of these three female storytellers in the competition is the greatest possibility as far as the social condition of medieval women is allowed. Even though the presence of the Prioress and the Second Nun is questionable, perhaps the limited choice of female tellers makes Chaucer to deliberately ignore the flaw.

Female storytellers tell different tales from the male storytellers. The two religious women tell legends. In the medieval society, hagiography was one genre in which women writers, including nuns, excelled. The two legends represent examples of religious narrative. Unlike the Parson's Tale whose method of salvation is a serious task of penitence, the two tales by the Prioress and the Second Nun celebrate human love for God in a fully Christian sense. Their tales emphasize the power of love, reaching its zenith in the figure of Virgin Mary. The Wife of Bath is of course a female rebel in almost every respect; however, she represents a positive defense of

⁷ For more detailed information about the five models, please see "The Wife of Bath and her four sisters: reflections on a woman's life in the age of Chaucer," in *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tale*, 187-89.

women. In her tale, she ventures to imagine an alternative to replace the worn-out misogynistic world. Like a clerk, she teaches men that experience is women's weapon against men's authority and that the best way to understand women is not by authority but by listening to them. Compared with male narratives, the three female tales serve to illustrate and celebrate those female qualities outside the male discourses on women.

The inclusion of the female storytellers is no doubt a bold endeavor in a society in which women are generally considered inferior and less intelligent. Unlike any other female characters found in the male narratives, Chaucer allows his three female pilgrims to speak freely and assertively. They are given a kind of autonomy and separateness not found in other tales. To consider the unfavorable climate for women at that time, their participation in the competitive storytelling game and the possibility that one of them could win the game are not only shocking but also preposterous to many contemporaries. But surprisingly their participation does not evoke any protest from the male competitors. The absence of hostility from their male pilgrims shows a dawning recognition of female voice. As Laskaya points out, "Chaucer's text is challenging the discourse surrounding femininity, arguing that women are not simply either rebellious or obedient but that they are also creating the game (and, by implication, the world)" (167). Furthermore, within their tales the female storytellers create female characters who, through words, rather than silence, exert considerable influence on the world. Their tales challenge and question the legitimacy of male domination and female subordination. Even though to many modern critics Chaucer's masquerade of the female voice does not seem wholehearted and likely to re-subscribe to patriarchal privilege, he surely makes the reader hear a chorus of female voice speaking for and about women themselves.

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《坎特伯利故事集》中的女性聲音

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摘要

喬叟的《坎特伯利故事集》是一部由一群中世紀朝聖者在前往坎特伯利大教堂朝聖往返途中透過說故事比賽所創作的文學作品。朝聖者來自社會上不同階級：包括騎士、教會人士、以及勞動階層。作者企圖藉著對這些代表人物的描述及他們所說的故事來呈現當時的中世紀社會。其中較特殊的是有三位女士同行（巴斯夫人、女修道院院長、與第二位修女）並參與說故事比賽。中世紀基本上是個由男性主宰的社會，女人通常地位較低且須依附男人而活。在大部份中世紀男性作品中只有好女人與壞女人。喬叟在此作品中卻一反常例的賦予這三位女士鮮明且獨特的個性以及發聲的機會。女性聲音的出現不但是象徵女性的自主，而且對於當時的男尊女卑的社會現象也予以質疑與挑戰。

關鍵字：喬叟、女性聲音、坎特伯利故事集