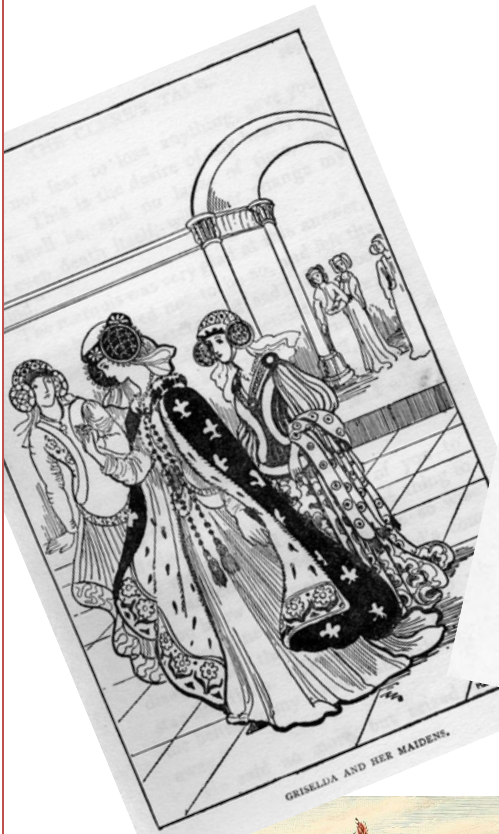


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Two Advocates of Feminism: Griselda and the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 3
Chapter 1. Women in Medieval England	p. 5
Chapter 2. Marriage and Female Identity in the <i>Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale</i>	p. 11
Chapter 3. Marriage and Female Identity in the <i>Clerk's Prologue and Tale</i>	p. 21
Conclusion	p. 28
Works Cited	p. 30

Introduction

In the 1990s, due to the influence of feminist scholarship, gender became a major issue within medieval literary studies, and the interest in Chaucer's portrayal of women in the *Canterbury Tales* increased even further. Rigby claims that feminist approaches are based on two beliefs: firstly, feminism is constructed within a social and historical perspective: what might come across as natural to one society, might be completely negated by another. Secondly, he argues that, in a society where women are legally inferior to their male contemporaries, gender does not only create social differences, but "sexual differences [also] come to be presented as a justification for sexual inequality" (117).

As a result of these feminist implications, scholars have presented us with new takes on the portrayal of female characters in Chaucer's works. Jill Mann, for example, argues that Chaucer allowed women to have their own identity, rather than an identity defined by male stereotypes (qtd. in Kowalewski 365). Nonetheless, other critics claim that Chaucer's female characters, such as Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale*, only serve to uphold the misogynist ideas of his time (Dyke 185). Even Chaucer himself elaborates on his characterization of women in the *Prologue of the Legend of Good Women*, in which he explains that he wrote *Legends of goode women, maydenes and wyves* "good women, maiden and wives"¹ (l. 474) (470), to defend himself against the conception that he was critical towards women (ll. 552-68; Collette 123).

The present paper will provide a critical analysis of the concept of feminism within Chaucer's the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*. Because the two leading female characters in these tales seem to represent two extremes, it is interesting to see how feminism, in this thesis is defined as "relating to, or advocating equal rights and gender equality of women" (Dictionary), is portrayed within the two tales through

¹ All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson and Christopher Cannon, 2008. All translations are from the *Chaucer in the Twenty-First Century E-Chaucer (Online Translations)*, Gerard Necastro, 2011.

the themes of marriage and female identity. This thesis will argue that although Griselda and the Wife of Bath initially seem to represent two extremes, the opposite is true, because both women display a strong sense of feminism through their ability to overthrow male authority. In addition, this paper will hopefully provide new insights on the concept of feminism in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*.

The chapter division of this thesis is as follows: chapter one will contextualise the position of women in late medieval England, and mainly focus on their roles within marriage and their right to individual ownership of property. The second chapter provides an analysis of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and closely look at the treatment of marriage and female identity to see how feminism is incorporated within these two themes. In chapter three, a similar account will be given for Griselda, the main character in the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*. Finally, a comparison will be given between the character of the Wife of Bath and Griselda from a feminist perspective.

Chapter 1

Women in Medieval England

This chapter will provide insight into the role and position of women in Medieval England. It will particularly focus on the role of women in marriage. In addition, female identity and women's rights in relation to property ownership will be addressed.

Generally, women have had little influence over their own future throughout history. Nonetheless, women enjoyed relatively expansive legal rights during the Anglo-Saxon period. Anglo-Saxon society not only allowed women to have various legal and customary rights, such as the right to child custody², the right to marry whom they chose³, and the right to individual land ownership⁴, but also vouched for women's involvement in politics, law and professional businesses (Clark 207). In Anglo-Saxon England, women were seen as adequate leaders, who could rule together with their husbands (219). Additionally, some women were privileged enough to decide whether they wanted to have children (216). Sheila C. Dietrich argues that, "during this period women exercised considerably [great] control over their destinies" (qtd. in Clark 207).

In 1066 the Anglo-Saxons were conquered by the Normans (Clark 223). Although William the Conqueror initially planned to retain the Anglo-Saxon laws and customs, he quickly disposed of this idea, and with that the status of women declined (223-24). As a result of William's new laws, women lost their rights with regard to landownership, child custody, and daughters could only inherit land if a son was absent. In addition, women lost their right to select a husband of their own choice, and were now under the authority of their fathers (227). Even before the Norman Conquest, women had started losing influence and power in the Church. The growing influence of Canon Law worsened the position of women in the

² According to law, a woman had the right to sole child custody, provided that her husband turned over his right to custody. In the case that the husband wanted to have sole custody over the children, the wife would be given half of his capital as compensation (Clark 217).

³ The laws of Cnut state: "let no one compel either woman or maiden to [marry a man] whom she herself dislikes" (215).

⁴ Under Anglo-Saxon law, women could own and control three types of real property, namely bookland, folkland and laenland. In addition, women could receive grants and hold land singly or jointly with their husbands (211-12).

Church, and only a few powerful women were found in the Church, where they received somewhat of an education. Although most women either married or led a monastic life, some occupations remained occupied by women, such as brewing, cloth making and cheese making. Nonetheless, most professions remained under the control of male-dominated guilds (231).

Attitudes towards women from the eleventh century onwards closely resembled classical ideals. For example, Aristotle considered women to be the inferior specie; he described women as “a deformity (...) in the ordinary course of nature” (qtd. in Wiesner 18). According to Aristotelian belief, everything in the physical world was composed on the basis of four elements. The elements consisted of fire, earth, air and water, with the complementing qualities of heat, dryness, coldness and wetness (Rigby 120). Aelius Galen noted that women contained cold and wet qualities, which often explained their deceitful nature, while men were dominated by the hot and dry (Rigby 120; Ward 3). Since heat was considered to provide the main essence of life, a man was considered “more perfect than [a] woman” (Galen qtd. in Rigby 120). This view can also be traced back to the medieval scientific philosophies (Rigby 120).

In general, the lives of most women during the late Middle Ages consisted of four main rites of passage, namely, birth, marriage, motherhood and death. A woman’s identity was determined by either her father or her husband. Therefore, the opportunities which presented themselves to a woman, varied not only according to her social rank, but also her age, and the stage that she had reached in her life (Mate 2; Ward 4). For example, according to the law, daughters were under the control and authority of their fathers, while wives were under the control of their husbands (2). For women, there were only a few opportunities to develop a career, and if opportunities presented themselves, these would often be poorly paid (Ward 6). Only widows had a certain legal independence (Mate 2). Therefore, taking care of

the family was at the centre of life for most women, along with taking care of animals and meeting agricultural demands (Ward 4; Mate 2). Nuns and anchoresses, however, were devoted to the cell or convent and were highly respected by society.

According to Jennifer C. Ward “evidence from the twelfth century onwards shows women being treated as people in their own right [again]”, however, women remained in subordinate positions (Ward 4). Only widows who chose not to remarry, the *femmes soles*, had greater financial and legal independence, and were able to hold their own properties. Nevertheless, only a few women during the Late Medieval Ages became *femmes soles* (4). In addition, because widows were disentangled from the authority of their husbands and fathers, they could decide with whom to remarry, and often lived a long and wealthy life (4).

During the twelfth century, the Church started to promote marriage (Ward 4). Since marriage was always presented with a transfer of goods, clear rules were implemented about the payment of dowries and the custody of children (McCarthy 51; Ward 6). For example, girls who were “unfree” had to pay *merchet*⁵ to their lords before they entered into marriage (Ward 6). Initially, the Church promoted marriage as a mutual consensus between two individuals, stressing the importance of love and bilateral counselling (McCarthy 51; Ward 4). According to societal standards, however, “marriage based only on love and attraction was (...) deplorable and short-sighted”, since marriage was a legal transaction that brought about new properties and households (Ward 11). Thus parents made early enquiries for the marriages of their children, taking into consideration strategic alliances as well as property arrangements (28). Due to these laws, the landless were often not able to marry (McCarthy 51). In addition, changes in land tenure in the thirteenth century also had great impact on women of all ranks of society, in which men and women were able to hold land jointly. These changes presented opportunities for the wife to inherit land and to autonomously run a

⁵ A fine paid by a tenant, esp. a villain, to his lord for allowing the marriage of his daughter (Dictionary).

business or households until her children were old enough to inherit the land (Ward 6). The Church most likely supported these changes, because female benefactors served as a principal source of income (Jewell 21).

Ward argues that it would be inaccurate to assume that urban and rural women were confined to one place all their lives (7). Although women's participation in pilgrimages was more common in the later Middle Ages, women did enjoy the freedom associated with going on pilgrimage (Diana Webb qtd. in Craigh 11). It has been suggested that one-quarter to one-third of the pilgrims were female (131). Frequently, people went on pilgrimage for the *imitatio Christi*, to adhere to the lifestyle of Christ. They would enlist in a re-enactment of the role of a saint as an intermediary between God and the mundane world (117). Turner and Turner describe pilgrimage as a liminal experience in which an individual would leave his or her home and culture, undergo a rite of passage, and then would return home as a different person. Often, a pilgrim's social status would be altered as well (qtd. in Craigh 14). In addition, women would go on pilgrimages in search of miracles for their children, to reaffirm their status as a caregiver, or simply for recreational purposes (119; Langland qtd. in Lee).

Contrastively, not all types of pilgrimage coincided with feminine duties, especially dangerous and long-distant pilgrimages to shrines such as Jerusalem and Rome. According to Leigh Ann Craig, pilgrimages to these shrines were not for the purpose of miraculous healing or *imitation Christi*, but offered Christians the possibility to reduce their time in purgatory (131). In order to achieve this, pilgrims would have to visit both Jerusalem and Rome, and the shrines of the saints mentioned in the New Testament (131). Nevertheless, pilgrimages to Jerusalem mostly served for men (132).

In terms of identity, women often saw themselves from the perspective of others, contextualised by either their family name or household, and were often referred to as the daughter or wife of a specified man (Ward 4). They were often criticized by their actions and

the fulfilment of their duties (7). As a result of the major influence of the Catholic Church in Medieval England, two types of women could be distinguished, namely, saint-like women, who followed the examples provided by the Church, and “exuberant”⁶ women. For some medieval women, the Virgin Mary presented a model to strive for. According to Vladislava Vaněčková, Mary was “both the ideal of chastity and of motherhood”, and set a constant example for both nuns and wives (8). However, because Mary was the sole woman who could be a virgin and mother simultaneously, female saints would often provide women with better role models (Ward 3). Therefore, Sarah Salih argues that the term “virgin” can only be applied to female saints (17). The idea of being chaste, however, was much broader and had the supplementary meaning of being “sexually appropriate” (16). For the Church, marital sex was considered a sin, because one party always had to subject to the wishes of the other (McCarthy 107). The Church only approved of intercourse if it was for the sole purpose of procreation (Karras 85). However, society’s view on marital sex differed greatly with that of the Church, and all that was needed to enter a marriage was the consent of two individuals, preferably in future or present tense, followed by sex (85).

On the other end of the line, there were the “exuberant” women, who were often labelled as whores because they had multiple sex partners (Karras 86). Ruth Mazo Karras argues that this was “perhaps due to the failure of some groups within society to accept the Church’s model of sexual behaviour”, which changed drastically during the 1300s (85). These women were often judged by their contemporaries, especially household servants (86-87). The acceptance of these morals, however, varied among the different social classes. In addition, Karras argues that “[t]he line between a respectable woman and a whore was a vague one”, because “exchange was part of matrimony as well as prostitution” (88).

In short, women’s rights, such as the right to individual land ownership, the right to

⁶ Here: women with a more open-minded view on “appropriate sexual behavior” (Karras 85).

marry whom they chose and professional business, were drastically reduced after the Norman Conquest. The lives of most women during the Middle Ages generally consisted of four main rites of passage, namely birth, marriage, motherhood and death, and their identities were determined by their fathers and husbands. Only widows enjoyed greater legal and financial independence, and were allowed to choose for themselves whom to re-marry. Additionally, a distinction was made between saintly and exuberant women which affected society's perception of women. The following chapters will discuss the possibly feminist behaviour of Griselda and the Wife of Bath.

Chapter 2

Marriage and Female Identity in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

This chapter will discuss how feminism is portrayed within the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* through the themes of marriage and female identity.

At the beginning of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Alisoun mentions that *[e]xperience, though noon auctoritee / [w]eere in this world, is right ynogh for me* “[e]xperience, though it would be no authority in this world, would be quite sufficient for me” (Chaucer ll. 1-2) (1-2). This remark already reinforces her sense of authoritative beliefs, in which she strives for independence. Nevertheless, she opposes the concept of authority by introducing the concept of experience (Hallissy 106). Margaret Hallissy argues that in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* “experience allows [Alisoun] to respond to questions discussed by authorities”, and notes that whereas authority is associated with men, experience is associated with women (106). The Wife of Bath associates authority with male oppression (106). In addition, Hallissy claims that the Wife of Bath refuses to believe what is written about women in books, because men, or in this case authority, have no experience regarding women (106). The latter is clearly indicated when Alisoun remarks *it is an impossible [t]hat any clerk wol speke good of wyves* “it is an impossibility that any scholar will speak well of women” (Chaucer ll. 688-689) (686-87). Additionally, Alisoun physically attacks misogynist literature when she tears out three pages from the book of wicked wives (Chaucer l. 790; Dyke 186), and thereby appeals to the need for gender equality.

In her *Prologue*, the Wife of Bath is critical of the teaching of the Church Fathers. She literally attacks the clergy when she slaps her fifth husband, who is said to be a clerk, with her fist (Chaucer l. 792). In doing so, she ridicules the authority of the clergy and their comments on the subordinate position of women in society, and stresses her need for independence once again. In her *Prologue*, Alisoun often refers to Biblical figures, nonetheless, she transforms

their stories in such a way that she can use them to her own advantage (Philips 110). For example, Alisoun argues that she should have authority over her husband because Saint Paul allowed this (160). In Corinthians 7:4-5, however, Paul argues that “[a] wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife” (BibleGateway). Thus, Alisoun deliberately changes the stories to suit her own specific circumstances.

Alisoun not only attacks Church authority, but also criticizes the concept of virginity. She claims that *[f]or hadde God commanded maydenhede, / [t]hanne hadde he dampned weddyng with the dede* “[f]or if God had commanded maidenhood, then with that same word had he condemned marrying” (Chaucer ll. 69-70) (66-67). In contrast to the Church’s view, wherein virginity was the highest human condition possible, Alisoun considers virginity to be a weakness (Rigby 6; Riverside 90-91). Although Alisoun does respect those who adhere to this ideal, she herself does not (Chaucer l. 112). She then continues by describing her own sexual nature exuberantly.

Despite the fact that Alisoun is critical of Church authority, she does mention that she was married in Church five times (Chaucer l. 6). This was probably the result of medieval marriage laws. Since marriage was an arrangement in which financial and other supplements were divided, it was wise for a woman to be married in a public place⁷ (Monger 71). By marrying in public, a woman was able to secure her part of the capital in case of widowhood (71). The fact that Alisoun has such extensive knowledge of marital laws displays not only that she is smart, but also suggests that the establishment of her identity is determined by no one but herself.

Another interesting feature is Alisoun’s manner of speech, which closely resembles the act of preaching. Hallissy argues that by speaking in such length and with such

⁷ A church, during the Middle Ages, was the most common public place where one would get married (Monger 71).

confidence, or indeed by speaking at all, the Wife of Bath takes on a role that was only appropriate to men (106). Alisoun's public speech therefore serves to advocate the concept of gender equality, since traditionally, the ideal woman was a quiet woman (106).

The idea of gender equality is also presented throughout the Wife of Bath's description of her marriages. Although most women within the late medieval period were under the authority of either their fathers or husbands (Mate 2), the Wife of Bath takes this authority and transfers it to herself. Within her *Prologue*, Alisoun states *[a]n housbonde I wol have – I wol nat lette – / [w]hich shal be bothe my detour and my tral* "I will have a husband who will be both my debtor and servant" (Chaucer ll. 154-55) (156-57), and stresses that she will have sole sovereignty over her husband's body (ll. 157-58). According to medieval astrology, the Wife of Bath's personality should not have been aggressive, but of very amorous character⁸ (Smith 89), which is clearly indicated when Alisoun admits that she chose her fifth husband out of love, not wealth (Chaucer l. 526). Nonetheless, Alisoun refuses to be dominated by her husband, or even corrected by him. She goes so far in this matter that she even uses physical violence against him (l. 807), until he places all material possessions back under her sovereignty (ll. 813-14). Only then are they able to have a healthy relationship.

The idea of female authority is also emphasized throughout the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, where Alisoun argues that sovereignty is what women desire most (Chaucer l. 1038). Sigmund Eisner argues, "the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is a conglomeration of separate and often widely scattered motifs" (45). It is the romantic story of the old hag, who becomes beautiful when her husband grants her sovereignty. In Alisoun's *Tale*, a knight is sentenced to death raping a young maiden (Chaucer l. 888). After the girl's complaint to the king, his queen begs her husband to grant the knight his life, and to place him under her will. The king adheres to his wife's wishes, and it is now up to the queen to decide whether the young knight will live

⁸ In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Alisoun mentions that her *ascendant was Taur, and Mars therinne* "my ascendant was Mars in Taurus" (Chaucer l. 613) (613). This was associated with having an amorous character (Smith 89).

(l. 898). Here, this transfer of power from the king to the queen is an early indicator of the Wife of Bath's intention that she is trying to convey by means of her *Tale*, namely that women should have sovereignty in marriage. This idea is strengthened by the old hag, who teaches the knight that *[w]omen desiren to have sovereynetee / [a]s wel over hir housbond as hir love, / [a]nd for to been in maistrie hym above* "women wish to have sovereignty as well over her husband as her love, and to have mastery over him" (ll. 1038-40) (1037-39). In addition, female sovereignty is stressed during the knight and old hag's wedding night, in which it is not until the knight turns over his sovereignty to his wife that she can be both beautiful and loyal to him (ll. 1220-24). Although, by medieval standards, Alisoun may seem to exaggerate when she suggests that, within a marriage, a woman should have sovereignty over her husband, she nevertheless appeals to the idea of gender equality. She takes the privilege of authority, which was initially reserved for a man, and places it in the hands of a woman. By means of these examples, Chaucer depicts the Wife of Bath as an independent woman with a feminist agenda; nevertheless he also portrays her as deceitful, manipulative and lascivious, which simultaneously serves to propagate misogynistic stereotypes. Indeed Alisoun, herself, is guilty at times of reinforcing such stereotypes. This is witnessed in the old hag's speech on courtesy, in which she provides the knight with an inaccurate telling of Ovid's tale, and instructs him on the deceitfulness of Midas' wife (l. 982). Thus, the old hag reinforces the misogynistic medieval stereotype by propagating misogyny herself.

Another element, in which the Wife of Bath's sense of individualism is portrayed, is in her depersonalization of sex throughout her vocabulary. According to Karras, the Wife of Bath closely parallels La Vieille, the old woman in *Le Roman de La Rose* for whom currency and sex were closely related (91). She argues that for Alisoun, money and sex converge not in prostitution but in marriage, which she displays in her choice of vocabulary (92). When Alisoun talks about her five husbands, she incorporates sales terms, for example when she

claims, *I have pyked out the beste, / [b]othe of here nether purs and of here cheste* “they were the best I could pick out, both in their bodies and of their coffers” (Chaucer ll. 44a-b) (42-43). These mercantile terms are closely linked to the Christian ideal of “marriage debt”, in which each partner owed sex to the other party, even if one partner did not consent to it (Karras 92). By using a mercantile vocabulary, Alisoun’s motives for marriage are associated with avarice and lust (92), and later, the Wife of Bath even acknowledges that she would exchange sex for money, when she claims *I wolde selle my bele chose (...)* “I would sell my beautiful thing” (Chaucer ll. 447-49) (449). These types of remarks seem to portray Alisoun as a deceitful, and exuberant woman, upholding the anti-feminist ideas that circulated during the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, by depersonalizing sex, Alisoun, again, pleads for gender equality. Here, her norms and values are similar to those of medieval men, who enjoyed more sexual freedom than women (Schaus 311).

This idea, that the Wife of Bath solely serves to uphold anti-feminist ideologies, can also be found within the description of her appearance, and her cloth-making business. Within the *General Prologue*, Alisoun is described as *[g]at-tothed* “gap-toothed” (Chaucer l. 468) (470), with *hipes large* “broad hips” (l. 472) (473), and chatty within a company (l. 474). Additionally, due to the description of her broad hips and wide standing teeth, she is presented as a well-figured woman, one who is sexually active and fit for motherhood (Pearman 61). The position of her teeth indicates that Alisoun is everything except an exemplary woman. She is jealous, bold, critical, luxurious and extravagant (61). However, Alisoun attributes her characteristics to her birthmark of Venus, which make her *faire, and riche, and yong and wel bigon* “fair, and rich, and youthful, and merry of heart” (Chaucer l. 606) (607-08). Additionally, she argues that although her senses are dominated by the planet Venus, her heart is controlled by Mars (ll. 609-10), which accounts for her resolute courage and fortitude (l. 611). Within the *General Prologue*, Chaucer describes how the Wife of Bath

acquires the land of her husbands after their passing, which allows her to set up her cloth-making business⁹. He continues to portray her as a very accomplished businesswoman, one whose competence surpasses that of Ypres and Ghent (l. 448), two of the most important cloth making centres in Belgium. By this means, Chaucer not only emphasizes her need to be successful, but also stresses the independent nature of her character. He then continues to describe her wealthy and luxurious lifestyle by giving descriptions of her clothing¹⁰. Her trousers, for example, were made of *fyn scarlet reed* “fine scarlet” (l. 455) (454), a colour that was only purchasable for the upper classes in society. In addition, Alisoun wears cover chiefs that *weyden ten pound* “weighed ten pounds” (l. 456) (454). As a result of these descriptions, Dorothy Colmer notes that the Wife of Bath represents a new layer within society, “the new rich” (329), and by means of her perseverance contradicts the misogynist idea that women could not run a successful business. Nevertheless, Alisoun’s success can simultaneously be conceived as the result of her greed and deceitfulness, since she predetermines her success by marrying three good men who are *riche and olde* “rich and old” (Chaucer l. 204) (197). As indicated earlier, this hankering for wealth is present in Alisoun’s *Tale* as well.

It is also interesting is to consider whether Alisoun’s childless state is a result of her avarice. When Alisoun talks about her fifth husband, she notes to *hym yaf I al the lond and fee (...)* / *[b]ut afterward repented me ful soore* “I gave him all the land and wealth that I had ever been given; but afterwards I repented myself sorely” (Chaucer ll. 632-33) (629-32). Normally, in late medieval England, widows would run businesses or households until their children were old enough to inherit the land (Ward 6). However, the Wife of Bath’s desire to own business and land independently may have restricted her decision to have children. In her *Prologue*, Alisoun argues that *[b]ut I seye noght that every wight is holde, / [t]hat hath swich harneys as I to yow tolde* “[b]ut I do not say that every person who has such equipment is

⁹ During the Middle Ages, setting up a successful business was considered a privilege reserved for men (see chapter 1).

¹⁰ Clothing also plays an important role in the *Clerk’s Tale*.

bound to go and use it for procreation” (Chaucer ll. 135-36) (135-36). Although this remark could refer to her viewpoint on chastity and virginity, it can be read as a reason for her childless state as well. Karen Harris namely argues that the Wife of Bath’s unproductiveness is a result of individual choice (11)¹¹. She pinpoints that Chaucer often inserts hidden messages within his works, which is the case in the *General Prologue*, when Chaucer speaks about the Wife of Bath’s knowledge on that art the *olde daunce* “the old dance” (l. 475) (477) and *remedies of love* “[l]ove and its remedies” (ll. 475-76) (475). In late medieval England (1400s), the word “remedy” conveyed the meaning of clearing up or avoiding a problem, which in the Wife of Bath’s case might have accounted for unexpected pregnancies, thus, when she speaks of “love and its remedies”, she might be referring to contraceptive measures (Harris 12). This idea of the Wife of Bath being in control of her childless state is already mentioned within the *General Prologue*, in which she is described as having broad hips (l. 472), a characteristic which was assigned to women who were fit to give birth. Nevertheless, it is implied that Alisoun chose not to have children (Karant-Nunn 10).

The term remedy could perhaps also refer to the murder of her husbands. Within the Wife of Bath’s account of her fourth and fifth husband, she uses a “suspicious incoherence and evasiveness” (Rowland and Palomo qtd. in Correale and Hamel 134), with imagery closely related to death (134). Beryl Rowland, for example, argues that Alisoun’s dream vision, in which she lays slain on her back surrounded by a puddle of blood, is a mirror image of an event that has occurred in the past, namely the murder of Alisoun’s fourth husband by her and her fifth husband, Jankyn (Chaucer 579; Correale and Hamel 134). Interesting is the Wife of Bath’s remark in which she argues *[f]or blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught* “for blood signifies gold, as I was taught” (Chaucer l. 581) (581-82). This statement might indicate that the sole reason Alisoun murdered her fourth husband was to get hold of his capital (581).

¹¹ This law was abolished after the Norman Conquest (see chapter 1), yet the Wife of Bath still seems to live by it.

This statement, once again, serves to uphold the anti-feminist identity associated with the Wife of Bath.

Additionally, Rowland argues that “it is this deed that haunts the development of [Alisoun’s and Jankyn’s] relationship”, in which the latter reads from the Book of Wicked Wives, as a result of his guilt (Rowland qtd. in Correale and Hamel 134). Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, on the other hand argue that this scenario is unlikely, as, in case Jankyn had conspired with Alisoun in the murder of her fourth husband, she would probably face worse consequences than he would. They note, “the clergy would save [Jankyn] from death, while her commission of petty treason in striking against her husbands life would lead her inevitably to the stake” (134-35). However, perhaps this risk of exposure was sufficient for the Wife of Bath to murder her fifth husband as well. According to the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, Jankyn was a merry and fresh clerk, nonetheless, he passed away relatively young (Chaucer l. 508). Although Alisoun never mentions the cause of death with any of her husbands, Hallissy argues that it was unusual for a woman to outlive so many husbands (106). In addition, the murder of Alisoun’s fourth husband would elucidate her reasons for going on pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome. Since Alisoun, throughout her *Prologue and Tale*, is highly critical of the Church, it is unlikely that she visited these shrines for contemplation. Although her visits to these cities may have been purely recreational, as Mary Carruthers notes that Alisoun “[desired] to hear sundry tales” (214; Langland qtd. in Lee 294), it could be suggested that Alisoun undertook these distant pilgrimages to shorten her time in purgatory, where she would have to expiate her sins. In the end, Alisoun’s – suspected - murder of her husband serves to gain gender equality in terms of equal financial rights. Nonetheless, Alisoun’s possibly murderous character simultaneously serves to uphold anti-feminist views.

In conclusion, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue* seem to have feminism written all over them. Alisoun strives for gender equality and equal rights through her successful

business in cloth making, her status as a widow, property ownership, marriage, and by means of her individual claim on authority: customs which were mostly reserved for her male contemporaries. Additionally, the Wife of Bath is highly critical of the authority provided by male-dominated sources, such as the Church Fathers. As a result, Chaucer seems to portray the Wife of Bath as a strong and independent individual, one whose identity seems to be determined by her will to succeed. Nevertheless, the misogynist ideas interwoven within the *Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue* remain intact, as the portrayal of Alisoun's character simultaneously suggests that women should not be granted a great amount of freedom due to their deceitful and malevolent nature. The latter is stressed by Alisoun's lies, avarice, and her own reinforcement of misogynistic stereotypes. Nevertheless, even her atrocious actions, such as the suspected murder of her husband, are part of a bigger picture, in which she strives to shape her own life and identity free of male interference.

Chapter 3

Marriage and Female Identity in the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*

In her analysis of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, Judith Bronfman discusses what critics have sought to explain for decades, namely, what message the tale is supposed to convey to its readers (4). Scholars have read the *Clerk's Tale* in various lights. Whereas some say it is a poem on wifely behaviour, others read it as a religious, historical or rather political allegory (5). Moreover, perhaps the poem simply serves to contrast against the Wife of Bath's exuberant lifestyle (5). This chapter will discuss how feminism is portrayed through the themes of marriage and female identity within the *Clerk's Tale* by focussing on the portrayal of Griselda. Simultaneously, a comparison will be drawn between the portrayal of feminism within the *Clerk's Tale* and that found in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*.

The image of the obedient Lady had long been circulating within the era of Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer, and before this was presented in the form of Dante's Beatrice (Kirkpatrick qtd. in Boitani 231). Chaucer was presumably unacquainted with Boccaccio's version of Griselda, as he indicates that Petrarch serves as his primary source (231). In the opening lines of the *Clerk's Prologue*, the Clerk refers to the original source of his story when he notes *Franceys Petrak, the lauriat poete, / [h]ighte this clerk* "Francis Petrarch, the laureate poet, is the name of this scholar" (Chaucer ll. 31-32) (21-22). Robin Kirkpatrick argues that Chaucer slightly adjusts Petrarch's perspective in order to emphasize the importance of "marriage and mastery" within the marriage-controversy presented in the *Canterbury Tales* (236). For example, Petrarch's line "(...) that you should bow your neck not only free but lordly to the lawful yoke"¹² (qtd. in Boitani 236), is paraphrased as follows by Chaucer at the beginning of the *Clerk's Tale*, *[b]oweth youre nekke undder that blissful yok / [o]f soveraynetee, noght of servyse, / [w]hich that men clepe spousaille or wedlock* "[b]ow

¹² Translated from the Latin "(...) collumque non liberum modo sed imperiosum legitio subicias iugo" (Kirkpatrick 236).

your neck under that blissful yoke of sovereignty, not of servitude, which men call espousal or wedlock (ll. 113-15) (105). The Clerk then continues to describe the circumstances under which Walter and Griselda are married.

Initially, Walter would *wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle* “he would not wed a wife, for anything that might happen” (Chaucer ll. 83-84) (82-83). This idea closely resembles Boccaccio and Petrarch’s ideal in which no wise man would take part in marriage if he desired to reach divine contemplation (Kirkpatrick qtd. in Boitani 232). However, after being pressured by the people in the kingdom (Chaucer ll. 113-15¹³), Walter decides to marry under one condition: he will retain sovereignty in his choice of wife (l. 163). Walter’s people agree, and Walter decides to take Griselda as his wife (l. 185). Griselda, as probably was the case during the Wife of Bath’s first marriage, has no sovereignty in her choice of marriage. Rather, her father and Walter – the two male dominant forces in the *Tale* – arrange the marriage (l. 345). Although Walter implies that Griselda has a choice when he notes *[f]or I wol axe if it hire wille be / [t]o be my wyf* “I wish to ask if it would be her will to be my wife” (ll. 325-26) (326), it would be unlikely for a woman to decline a marriage that would result in her rise of social class.

Kathryn McKinley argues that Griselda is “something of a hagiographic Barbie” (qtd. in Pugh 87). She is presented as a flat character, incapable of irony, which hides behind her religious virtues (87). In addition, Griselda’s identity seems to be determined, not by herself, but her father and husband. Initially, Griselda is described as a child who always *kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte / [w]ith everich obesaunce and diligence* “she always sustained her father’s life with all the obedience that a child could show” (Chaucer ll. 229-30) (227-30). When Walter asks Griselda’s father for her hand in marriage, Griselda’s obedience is transferred from her father to her husband, as she claims she will do anything according to the

¹³ Chaucer’s following references are all written in the *Clerk’s Tale*.

wishes of her husband, even if this were against her own will (ll. 362-64). Walter's sovereignty over Griselda continues to be displayed within the challenges that he presents her with. Although Griselda is faithful and loyal to Walter, he decides to test her nevertheless. When Walter orders to take away their children (l. 497), Griselda's only response is that she will obey and do everything that her husband desires. She even states that *I lefte my wyl and al my libertee* "I left my will and all my freedom" (l. 656) (656-58), when she left her father's house. Nonetheless, one could argue that formerly, her will was not her own, but determined by her father. This superficial characteristic in Griselda's identity is further emphasized when the Clerk describes Griselda's lack of tears when her children are taken away from her. The Clerk notes that, the entire time, she *kepte hire eyen dreye* "kept her eyes dry of tears" (l. 900) (900-01). As a result of Griselda's female passiveness displayed within the *Clerk's Tale*, the *Tale* is often read as an example of female-submissiveness, depicting the idealistic lifestyle of a "good wife" (Cox 67).

Contrastively, Anne Laskya argues that from an all-Christian framework, one might argue that Griselda has more sovereignty, thus is more powerful than Walter (qtd. in Mann XVI). Griselda, in her initial description, is portrayed as a virtuous maiden (Chaucer ll. 215-17), one who is honourable and obedient (ll. 230-31). She is described as the epitome of wifely obedience (l. 429). However, the clearest example of her moral justness and Christian values is exemplified when the Clerk indirectly compares Griselda to Job. The Clerk claims: *Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite / [a]s woman kan, ne kan been half so trewe / [a]s women been, but it be falle of newe* "no man can behave as humbly as a woman can, nor can be half so loyal as a woman can be, unless it has happened very recently" (ll. 936-38) (936-38). Here, Job serves not to convey the supremacy of the male species, but rather the failure of the male-figure in contrast to the female suffering demonstrated by Griselda (Pugh 90). Griselda is able to combat Walter's cruelty, simply because she is a woman (90).

Interesting is the Clerk's remark in which Griselda *wolde over hir tressshfold gon* "she was about to cross over her threshold" (Chaucer l. 288) (288), but then is stopped by the marquis (l. 295). The concept of the threshold, within various descriptions of Saints' lives, represents the boundary that distinguishes the profane world from the sacred (Eliade qtd. in Gerstel 3). Griselda's relationship to God can be seen as the only earthly form of authority that allows her to gain sovereignty over her husband. This can clearly be seen in the process of abandonment of her children. She gains authority over Walter by blessing her son and daughter before they are taken away by one of her husband's men (Chaucer ll. 552-678). Griselda knows that not she, but her husband is responsible for the presumable deaths of her children. Additionally, she does not allow herself to cry over the loss of her children since she has cleared herself of all intimate and earthly desires (l. 491). Griselda solely adheres to God's wishes; it is only in the end, when she is reunited with her children that she cries (l. 1082). This description of Griselda's tears closely resembles various depictions of Christ within the Bible, in which he cries over the world's injustices and God's ultimate victory (Eklund 40). Although one can argue that throughout this process Griselda wins authority over her husband, she nonetheless remains under the control of another man, namely God. Edward I. Condren however proposes that Griselda *is* God; she is to Walter as God is to man (qtd. in Bronfman 28). She serves to address the flaws within humanity (28).

Another plane where Griselda unties herself from the authority of her husband, and at the same time stresses the concept of gender equality, is throughout her knowledge of the marital laws. Already in the beginning, Griselda is described as possessing natural wit, and when required, she would advocate the common good (Chaucer ll. 430-34). According to Kathryn E. Jacobs, within no tale in the *Canterbury Tales* is the secular and ecclesial marriage law as complex and attentively integrated as within the *Clerk's Tale* (30). Initially, it is Walter who manages to shape the marriage contract between him and Griselda by

manipulating the laws designed by secular court (30). Therefore, no external influences, such as the priest or the Catholic Church, have a saying over his marriage with Griselda (30). Unlike the Wife of Bath, who in her *Prologue* notes *[h]ousbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve* “I have had five husbands at the church-door” (Chaucer l. 6) (5), and who was well aware of not only the marital laws, but also the inheritance laws which applied to women during the late Middle Ages, Griselda’s union to Walter has no official standing in court. In addition, because Griselda did not bring dower or dowry into the marriage, she has no right to an official restitution of capital or material belongings, even if her marriage to Walter were to be disbanded (Jacobs 30). When Walter informs Griselda that he will choose another wife to replace her (Chaucer l. 792), Griselda immediately appeals to customary laws. Initially, Griselda can literally be sent home naked due to the fact that she was stripped of her clothes when she left her father’s house (ll. 863-65). Griselda is well aware of the fact that she has no right to dowry, since she brought none into her marriage. Nonetheless, she reasons that she brought Walter her *feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede* “faithfulness and nakedness and maidenhead” (l. 867) (867), and argues that she has the right to a smock (l. 886). Although Walter seems to imply that he granted Griselda the smock out of compassion (l. 808), Jacobs argues that Griselda, by forcing Walter to accept her terms throughout her clever negotiation style, resembles more “a marquise than a village maiden” (32). In the end, Griselda seems to be more accustomed to the customary laws, and social class she now belongs to than Walter (33). Nonetheless, by winning over this item of clothing by means of her reasoning, Griselda, for a brief moment, gains sovereignty over Walter. Jacobs additionally notes that Walter and Griselda, by employing their knowledge over customary laws in such a precise and conscious manner, suggest that Chaucer wrote for an equally perceptive crowd (30).

As in *the Wife of Bath’s Tale*, where Alisoun’s clothing represents her successes as an entrepreneur and an established woman, Griselda’s clothing also plays a characterizing role in

the establishment of her identity. Roger Ramsey writes that Griselda's swaps of clothing represent her changes in social status (qtd. in Hodges 92). He argues that the contemporary audiences would have known the differences between the type of smock worn by peasants, and those by ladies higher up in class (92). The former would namely be made of undecorated and coarse cloth, while the latter would be made out of linen or silk (92). Griselda's first transformation of clothing, where she is disposed of her *olde geere* "old clothing" (Chaucer l. 372) (373), and instead dressed in jewels, represents her rise to the aristocratic class (l. 378). Christiane Klapisch-Zuber notes that this transformation is part of the "marital gifts", in which the husband is responsible for publicly providing his bride with a new wardrobe (qtd. in Hodges 94). This re-dressing of Griselda by Walter, inaugurates his "masculine-authority" over Griselda, which is now transferred from her father to her husband (94). Nonetheless, Griselda's clothing now mirrors her virtues, which were initially hidden under *low degree* "lowly social rank" (Chaucer l. 425) (425). Charlotte C. Morse even suggests that, within Griselda's life, this new wardrobe refers to the "putting on of Christ" (qtd. in Hodges 100). Nevertheless, Griselda's first clothing swap never influences her virtuous behaviour, until she reaches her second clothing swap. This second re-redressing represents her casting-out from the higher rank of society back to peasantry. Heller notes that fashion always influence a person's mental state. People who wear fashionable items feel more confident, individual and have a higher sense of self-authority (100). This sense of increased self-value is exemplified in Griselda's negotiations to retain her smock. Here, she seems more authoritative and independent (Chaucer l. 886). Griselda's last clothing transformation, where she is dressed in a golden-woven dress (l. 1117), represents her re-instatement within society as Walter's wife, and serves to emphasize her as the epitome of virtuousness.

Despite the fact that Griselda's identity seems to be determined by the men around her, she, similarly to the Wife of Bath, on occasions, resembles a man more than a woman.

On one hand, the *Tale* seems to imply that Griselda is the perfect example of wifely behaviour, and with that reaffirms the misogynist ideals about women that circulated in the late Middle Ages. Steve Ellis notes that Griselda is disempowered by her virtues, and that her subordinate position towards Walter is punitive, if not self-destructing (123). On the other hand, Griselda is portrayed as powerful through her suffering and constancy. She is always *sad and constant as a wal* “steady and constant as a wall” (Chaucer l. 1047) (1047), even after Walter’s attempts to test her. Especially interesting is Griselda’s remark in which she states that she will please her husband without fainting (l. 970). Chaucer, in his works, often uses the concept of swooning to show the intensity of emotions. Nonetheless, this is mainly associated with masculine virtues. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, Troilus swoons because his love for Criseyde runs so deeply that it even touches upon his senses (Mann, Cannon and Nolan 229). Griselda, however, by refusing to swoon, once again overcomes masculine authority, and ridicules the notions of power and gender-based identity, which the patriarchal culture is based on (Ellis 123). At the same time, Griselda’s actions are so passive and constant that “she appears to embody the worst cultural stereotypes regarding female submission” (Pugh 85).

To summarize, in the *Clerk’s Tale*, Griselda seems to be portrayed as the epitome of passive medieval wifely behaviour. She is obedient, quiet, and adheres to the wishes of the men around her, who even determine her identity. Unlike the Wife of Bath, Griselda has no interest in obtaining power, legal rights, or anything that might contradict the authority of her husband. Therefore, one could argue that Griselda is nothing more than a flat character. She solely serves to uphold the anti-feminist beliefs of the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, from a Christian point of view Griselda seems to overcome gender barriers by gaining spiritual authority over Walter. Here, Griselda’s passiveness serves to pinpoint the failures in male-dominated society. In addition, Griselda attempts to retain control over her identity by

obtaining her smock, and with this places the concept of feminism at the centre of attention. Thus, although Griselda and Alisoun initially seem to represent two extremes - Griselda by being portrayed as the epitome of wifely behaviour, while Alisoun is presented as anything but that – the opposite is true. Both women namely display a strong sense of feminism through their ability to overthrow male authority. Griselda achieves this through her passivity, and Alisoun throughout her assertiveness.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a comparison of how feminism, in terms of equal rights and gender equality of women, is portrayed within the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*, through the themes of marriage and female identity. It has explored whether Chaucer's female characters served to uphold the misogynist ideals that circulated during the Middle Ages, or contrastively, were meant to promote feminism in the midst of a misogynist society.

The first chapter of this thesis provided a framework in which the legal rights of women, before and after the eleventh century, were discussed. It established that before the Norman Conquest, during the period of 580 A.D. to 1066, women enjoyed far greater freedom in terms of property, individual ownership and children's custody. The chapter also elaborated on the fact that after the Norman Conquest, women were often seen in a negative light due to the revival of Aristotelian thinking on women. However, from the twelfth century onwards, women gradually started to gain more freedom again, particularly if they were widows. Nonetheless, in terms of identity, most women were contextualised from the perspective of their fathers or husbands. In addition, two types of women are distinguished, namely virtuous women, who adhered to the teachings of the Church, and exuberant women, whose norms and values were still unaccepted by their contemporaries.

Chapter two discussed the portrayal of feminism in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, through the themes of marriage and female identity. In terms of identity, Chaucer portrays Alisoun as an assertive and independent woman. She runs a successful business, owns property independently, and is allowed to re-marry whomever she wants. In addition, Alisoun strives for equal rights and gender equality by refusing any form of male-authority, whether it be her husband's or the Church's. Alisoun is solely responsible for her successes and the formation of her identity. Although the *Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue* can be read

from a feminist point of view, other elements seem to imply that her character solely serves to uphold medieval misogynistic ideals. For example, Alisoun's misquoting of Ovid shows that she herself is guilty of propagating and reinforcing misogynistic views. In addition, the treatment of her husbands serves to show her deceitful and manipulative behaviour.

Nonetheless, one could argue that even these deceptions are part of a bigger picture, in which Alisoun strives to forge her life free from male oppression.

Chapter three discussed the portrayal of feminism in the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*. In this chapter, the themes of marriage and female identity were discussed by focussing on Griselda. Initially, Griselda is portrayed as a flat character who serves to uphold anti-feminist views. Her passiveness is so present in the *Clerk's Tale*, that according to scholars she might be the world's worst female stereotype. In contrast to the Wife of Bath, Griselda is portrayed as the epitome of wifhood, because she adheres to male-authority, whether it be her father's, husband's or God's. Therefore, her will and identity are determined by the men surrounding her. Nevertheless, when Griselda's story is viewed from a Christian point of view, she seems to adhere to the concept of feminism much more. Now, Griselda's passiveness, which is greater than that of Job, serves to comment on the flaws within a man's world. Moreover, by surpassing Job in his passiveness, she appeals to gender equality. She implies that women can be just as successful as men. In addition, Griselda displays feminist behaviour by insisting on retaining her smock and hence by extension her identity.

By means of critical and comparative analysis, this thesis has shown that although the characters of the Wife of Bath and Griselda initially seem to represent two extremes, both women, by means of their words and actions display certain similar feminist behaviours. In addition, this paper has provided new insights on the concept of feminism through the specified themes of marriage and female identity, and will hopefully contribute to future research on the topics of feminism and misogyny in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

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