Chaucer's women in history: Non-Passive Submissiveness and the Voices of the Oppressed in the Canterbury Tales

By

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Abstract

It has been long accepted that submissive and passive women in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* have no voice and are subjected to men. However, in his portrayal of three such seemingly voiceless women, Constance, Grizeld, and Virginia, Chaucer’s tales display inconsistencies and ruptures in the images of these women. I argue that these three characters show non-passive submissiveness, which means the internal resistance and desire to change their lives. This resistance remains hidden however, due to the character of patriarchal society. The main goal of my thesis is to reveal women’s emerging subjectivity and agency exposed through such ruptures and distortions of their portrayal by Chaucer.

I outline the medieval moral values and ideals regarding women’s role in society, imposed mainly by the Church. The Church preached that women should be under male control because women were believed to be inherently wicked and evil. In marriage, all power should be attributed to the man whereas the woman must be silent and subjected to him. Then, I describe the possibilities and positions held by real women of Medieval England in London. Women had numerous inheritance and property rights, which allowed them to secure their positions in society and confront their husbands’ authority. They actively participated in the economic life in England. Women were not only equal partners of their husbands, but they also ran their own businesses independently. Thus, they were not only able to resist male power, but also became increasingly visible in public space as prominent social actors. Chaucer, who had various social experiences and performed many social roles, such as soldier, royal official, Member of Parliament, or judge, was deeply connected with contemporary social life. Therefore, I argue, that his work is inspired by women’s visibility and public presence, which is reflected in his writing.
I argue that the non-passive kind of submissiveness of these non-submissive women can be directly related to their high visibility in the public sphere as reflected by Chaucer. His language, using accepted moral values and ideals, proved insufficient to accommodate these visible and entrepreneurial women. I focus on the tensions between social reality and the language used by Chaucer. Hence, it is important to focus on these tensions and ruptures. Seemingly passive Constance uses many subtle ways to change her life, such as complaints, indirect actions, and manipulations of the religion. Her active attitude destroys her image as a holy woman, who is ready to suffer for the sake of male will. Grizeld creates her agency and autonomy by the active performance of duties, which were assumed to be done by her husband. In such a way, she is able to develop her autonomous subjectivity. Finally, Virginia, by demanding her own participation in decision making regarding her life, ruptures the image of a saint woman, seen as always ready to die in order to preserve her chastity. She creates a discourse of her feminine otherness that threatens masculine domination.

Language contains fixed ideals and norms, which are hard to change, which is why problems arise in describing actual life. Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales* by using this language at his disposal. However, the tension between active women seen everywhere in the street in almost equal positions with men create the situation where Chaucer’s submissive women are hardly passive. His reflection upon feminine agency and autonomy serves as an example of the ways of how oppressed and marginalized women could influence male writing in such a way that Chaucer accepts not only their existence, but their personalities, agency, and autonomy.
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Introduction

Who are Chaucer’s women and what does Chaucer think of them? These questions, made by Arlyn Diamond in 1988, after one hundred years of Chaucer’s studies, in the 2015 are still relevant.¹ The claims for sexual freedom and power for women, which is attributed to the Wife of Bath, was so promising that many scholars started to look at her and other characters, who claim those supposedly “modern” indicators of women’s emancipation. For scholars, as Diamond evaluates, Chaucer was the women’s biggest friend.² Thus, conventional characters, where women are distinctly praised for being passive and submissive were neglected. Cox argues that feminists have problems with Chaucer’s victimized women, because they prefer to look at the poet as the “women’s” friend.³ Strangely enough, the Wife of Bath was reread hundreds of times with completely opposite interpretation,⁴ conventional passive female characters preserve their passivity in scholarship without serious rereading.

This depressing reading of so called “traditional characters” in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales was due to the widespread tendency within “second wave feminism” to look for the structural oppressions of women and the ways this oppression worked. This approach has led to the victimization of women. As a reaction to this “third wave feminism” (without ignoring the suppression of women) tends to see more optimistic angles, such as ways how women and other oppressed groups could and found ways on which to resist patriarchy. In this way, women were

² Ibid., 65.
³ Catherine S. Cox, Gender and Language in Chaucer (University Press of Florida, 1997), 53.
⁴ The bibliography of Wife of Bath’s scholarship, published in 1998, has more than 300 pages (Peter G. Beidler and Elizabeth M. Biebel, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale: An Annotated Bibliography, 1900 to 1995 (University of Toronto Press, 1998). The range of opinions about the meaning of the character varies from the glorification of her modern ideas of women’s freedom to the interpretation of her image as a mocking of women, who dare to challenge traditional patriarchal society.
not only victims of male dominance, but they then also played an important role in the society in order to establish their autonomy, acquire their autonomy and independence.

Chaucer’s passive women, thus, are very important to reconsider. As the Medieval society was always seen as extremely patriarchal, where women were completely excluded from any public activities, Chaucer’s non-submissive women show us a unique example of ways on how women do have their voices and agency. Their voices were so “loud” that we had a chance to listen to them through the writing of men. Thus, a new reading of Chaucer gives us a chance to understand that oppression is not absolute and, through tenets of male dominance one can find a way to express oneself and make women be heard by men.

Recent gender scholars have started to read the Tales using gender connected theories and approaches. Laskaya distinguishes “The Man of Law’s Tale”, “The Clerk’s Tale”, and “The Physician’s Tale” and points out that in all these stories women are praised for their ability to confront. Cox also sees those three tales as a description of suffering women within a patriarchal society. However, she misses gender implications of the Tales as she claims that those women speak only from the hegemonic ideological system; they do not have their own voices. Thus, for her these stories are more about masculine domination, rather than women’s suffering. Mann’s main claim is that through suffering, women empower themselves and represent not essential women’s lives full of suffering, but they show the universal conditions of all human beings; thus, women in Chaucer are the scale, against which all humankind is measured.

Scholars refused to study “The Man of Law’s Tale”, as Dinshaw writes, due to the fragmented and inconsistent character of the tale. Using Levi Strauss’s exchange theory, the

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5 Anne Laskaya, *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1995), 149.
6 Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, 75.
7 Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2002).
8 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 88–89.
Dinshaw sees in Constance a good, which is traded in homosocial community. Recognizing that Constance has some self-consciousness, however, Dinshaw underestimates Constance’s presence and subjectivity and states that this consciousness serves patriarchy too. Delany looks at Constance in this manner too. Delany concludes that Constance represents universal virtues for both genders; thus, she suffers not because of she is a woman, but because she is a human being. Delany reduces Constance to the moral ideal of all people; she ignores the gender dimension of the Tale and Constance’s agency and autonomy implementation. Cox admits the story offers a variety of reading and interpretations due to the existence of different parts of the story, which are in conflict. However, she treats Constance only as an object of God and other males, who determine her life. Bloomfield also sees in Constance a complete victim, the very presence of who glorifies the genuine experience of Christians in the world. However, there are alternative readings of the “Man of Law’s Tale”. Clasby, in 1979 challenged the idea of an entirely submissive Constance. She argues that, in fact, Constance never submits to any worldly authority. Moreover, she takes many pains insofar as it depends on her to change her destiny or to defend herself. Mann also reconsiders this view. She somehow combines both views and

9 Ibid., 95–96.
10 Ibid., 99.
11 Ibid., 110–111.
12 Ibid., 112.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 70.
16 Cox, Gender and Language in Chaucer, 73.
17 Ibid., 74.
18 Laskaya, Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales, 149–150.
20 Ibid., 389.
22 Ibid., 226.
23 Ibid., 228.
claims that Constance’s suffering and obedience are what empowers her.曼恩强调的虔诚，即所有人在世界上如何生活。\(^26\)因此，她也倾向于将康斯坦斯视为一个象征，它被设计为所有人生活在一个充满痛苦的世界中的代表。然而，曼恩错过了故事中的一些地方，康斯坦斯显示了她隐藏的反抗，以改变她的条件。即使她不能改变它，她也公开表达了她的反对。这是由于忽视了对性别影响的关注而得出的结论。

学者们以“The Clerk’s Tale”为相似的方式解读。对考克斯来说，格里塞尔德象征着理想版本的沉默妻子，她履行应该由好妻子来履行的职责。\(^27\)但格里塞尔德的被动性也可以被看作是使女性在压迫性结构中得到力量的一种方式。\(^28\)因此，考克斯承认格里塞尔德在某种程度上是独立的，因为她是一个具有两面性的女性角色，由男性意识形态来框定。\(^29\)拉斯卡亚声称格里塞尔德是一个完全顺从的女人，她屈从于父权制。\(^30\)戴蒙德描绘她为一个理想的女性，拥有所有女性美德，因此，格里塞尔德代表了一个理想的女性。\(^31\)然而，其他学者并不同意这一结论。米勒指出，这个故事在道德上是令人不安的，而且更重要的是，乔叟希望这个故事应该以这样的方式来阅读。\(^32\)汉森反对“传统”阅读。对她来说，格里塞尔德面对父权制的权力，并且她的

\(^{24}\) Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2002), 106.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 112.

\(^{27}\) Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, 67.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{30}\) Laskaya, *Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales*, 150.

\(^{31}\) Diamond, “Chaucer’s Women and Women’s Chaucer,” 74.

\(^{32}\) Mark Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 216.

submissiveness is in fact her power. Through the acquisition of feminine virtues she becomes influential and, thus, creates a danger for Walter’s masculine domination. His cruel behaviour is a response to that threat. Mann treats Grizeld in the same way, Grizeld does not rebel because following the rules and being obedient can empower her. However, both scholars, refuse to look at Grizeld as an autonomous and subjective person. The very conclusion that Grizeld can have power only because she follows the rules for ideal women emphasizes that she is seen as subjected to patriarchal power and only by submitting to this, e.g. by reinforcing the structure of oppression, she can achieve power. However, her behaviour and her speech indicate that her passivity hides something very important that cannot be seen as silence and submissiveness. The political implications of the story were analysed by Heffernan and Strohm. Heffernan asserts that Grizeld eventually manages to convert Walter’s tyranny both in political and private spheres, and mitigate the tensions between communes and the marquis. Strohm indicates that Grizeld has a strong commitment to “commune profit”, to the idea very popular in XIV century England. Although, as I will show political dimension is crucial to understand the story, this dimension cannot be separated from gender concerns, as it is in both politics and private spheres, where Grizeld operates and combines them.

The final Tale to be analysed here is “The Physician’s Tale”. For most scholars Virginia is understood as a traditional female character, a symbol of obedience and the glorification of virginity. Cox considers her in that way, when virginity is more important than a virgin herself.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 194.
39 Cox, Gender and Language in Chaucer, 58.
Cox points out the Tale itself is not consistent; however, she rejects to see Virginia as a separate independent character. Laskaya also argues that Virginia is absent from the story. Using the assumptions about distortions and ruptures in the Tale, Farber tries to find some dimensions of Virginia’s personality in order to understand what motivates the girl to agree to be killed. She proposes to see that Virginia has a distinct voice in the story. Mann reads Virginia in the similar way as he did the previous two characters, that is, Virginia through piety confronts the tyranny. For them Virginia is a submissive object of the father’s will, who does not possess any distinct and personal features.

Overall, the literature review shows that three Tales chosen for the analysis have been scrutinized before. However, female characters were seen as symbols of obedience, as silent objects of under the power males. In some researches gender dimensions were reduced to moral or political issues, in others, submissiveness was seen as empowering. Although, on the surface Constance, Grizeld, and Virginia seem to be passive and submissive women, their speeches and their behavior show distortions and ruptures of these supposedly silent and dependent women depictions. These ruptures and inconsistences were mostly dismissed as insignificant in existing readings of those characters. Through this breakthrough reality one can see agential character of three women, which indicates that they are in fact not so passive. This hidden resistance, which they show through the ruptures and distortions I call non-passive submissiveness. Even if they are submissive, it does not mean that they agree with the situations. Their internal resistance and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{40}}\text{Ibid., 64.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{41}}\text{Ibid., 59–60.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{42}}\text{Laskaya, Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales, 150.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{43}}\text{Lianna Farber, “The Creation of Consent in the ‘Physician’s Tale,'” The Chaucer Review 39, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 152.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{44}}\text{Ibid., 151.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{45}}\text{Ibid., 160.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{46}}\text{Mann, Feminizing Chaucer, 2002, 114.}\]
desire to change their lives exemplifies non-passive submissiveness, which is due to the patriarchal society, not to their acceptance of that society. They find a way to confront it, therefore they are not passive, even if submissive.

It was due to the lack of attention to historical reality, where those stories were created by Chaucer, it is why scholars have not focused on those ruptures and distortions. Patterson points out that it is very important to understand the conditions of Chaucer’s life and society in order to understand the Canterbury Tales properly. 47 Diamond also adds that we cannot have adequate pictures concerning women’s positions in medieval society based on literature and sermons. 48 We should go beyond and look at historical reality. When presented within the context of Chaucer’s life and historical background those distortions will reveal their meaning and the presence of active women in the Canterbury Tales. In this intersection of history and literature I will analyze Chaucer’s submissive women.

In order to explain how women’s agency and autonomy is expressed through distortions and ruptures in Chaucer’s women I will use a range of historical works to show what conditions women endured in medieval English society, and to what extent they were seen in the public sphere. I will use biographical sources in order to show how Chaucer draws on his own life experience to imagine these female characters.

My theoretical framework comes from a school of literary scholarship. First, as Cox argues, the meaning of the Canterbury Tales is produced outside of Chaucer’s control.49 Thus, to understand its meaning is to go beyond the literary critique of the work. Secondly, I will use Diamond’s suggestion regarding the possibility to hear women’s voices even even in male

49 Cox, Gender and Language in Chaucer, 1.
literature.\textsuperscript{50} Thirdly, I will use Patterson’s reasoning about the historicity of subjectivity, where he claims that subjectivity is not a part of the modern world, but rather “a human characteristic that has always been part of our history, albeit in different configurations”.\textsuperscript{51}

Furthermore, it is important to understand how women, who, according to my assumption, were imprinted in Chaucer’s mind, were transported from the historical reality into his writing. Literature contains condensed moral stable social ideas, which are hard to modify. However, Aers states that established cultural categories are impossible to apply to the current reality.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, fixed ideas can clash with real life. Creators of literary work face something, which is not explained properly by established moral values. The subject needs these factors to be explained in terms that are suitable for his/her mindset, thus he/she uses old language and old ideals to describe them and to adjust to norms, otherwise it would lead to frustration.\textsuperscript{53} It means that one can see disruption in language, because language cannot adequately describe reality. In other words, the rupture highlights the tension between language and reality.\textsuperscript{54} McIntosh, whose theory I use here, points out that it is very important to consider the context and material reality to understand the tensions and the way these are resolved.\textsuperscript{55} Strohm adds that written documentation is a very useful source to recognize these social changes.\textsuperscript{56} In this rupture, in this distortion of the order and norms I will find the agency of Chaucer’s women.

In order to do so, I need also to imply the concept of agency as, is the very agency of women, which influenced Chaucer’s writings. Miller introduces a concept of agency, which he

\textsuperscript{50} Diamond, “Chaucer’s Women and Women’s Chaucer,” 62.
\textsuperscript{51} Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, 12.
\textsuperscript{52} David Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430 (Routledge, 1988), 6.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 87–88.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{56} Strohm, Social Chaucer, 1994, 1–2.
also applies to Chaucer’s works. He is against reducing agency both to the complete autonomy as well as the complete subject construction through internalization of dominate ideology. 57 He emphasizes the importance of questions, which the agent raises and responds to, such as moral and justice issues, duties, interactions with other agents etc. 58 Thus, the questions here are not only about cultural determinations of an agent’s life and choices, but also about intersections of “identification, desire, and self-understanding”. It is in this intersection that the agential pattern of women can be found. 59 This understanding of agency will require a combination of history and literature, because history provides cultural determinates and literary works contain the agential patterns.

In order to focus on the goals of the thesis, I propose the following structure, in order to show cultural determinates of the condition of women in Medieval England, in the first chapter I will outline the ideal women’s images derived from Church and monks’ writing, then I will move on to describing the legal status of women and their economic involvement and public presence. To establish the connection between Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and history I will outline shortly the main stages of Chaucer’s biography. In the second chapter, I will analyze “The Man of Law’s Tale”, “The Clerk’s Tale”, and “The Physician’s Tale” in order to show the ruptures and distortions, through which women’s agency can be found. In conclusion, I will establish the connection between Chaucer’s women, Chaucer’s time, and Chaucer’s life and conclude that women’s active participation in economic activities and high visibility were imprinted in Chaucer’s writings, where the poet portrayed their agency and autonomy.

57 Miller, Philosophical Chaucer, 13.
58 Ibid., 14.
59 Ibid., 18.
Chapter 1. Women in English society.

Marriage is the one and most important institutes within which women were acknowledged by the law, dominant ideology, and Church, therefore, the transgression happened within and beyond the marriage. This is why the analysis will trace mainly marriage issues. Thus, it seems reasonable to outline what dominant ideology says about women’s role in the society and family (in fact, these themes are overlapped as women’s role in the society was understood as their role in marriage; it was the one destination for medieval women’s), then, to describe legal rights and obligations women had, and eventually, to look at the real practices and women involvement in the public activities. As women were excluded from administrative and war activities, public activities were concentrated in trade, work, and property issues. Lastly, I will briefly describe Chaucer’s life in order to show that his writing was influenced by these “emancipated” women.

Great attention will be devoted to London, because London was the biggest and most economically developed city, where Chaucer could see these “emancipated” women. Another important concern relates to class. Mostly they were the wives of urban merchants or gentry, and women who migrated to the city due to harsh economic conditions. Higher class women and nobility participated in trade and financial activities as well, but to a lesser extent, because higher class women were more restricted in their social and economic behaviour.

1.1. “Ideal” women in a Christian society

To develop the ideological justification of women's role in society, theologians used several presumptions. Firstly, man was created to perfection. Secondly, he was created in the image of God. Thirdly, the woman was created to serve the man. And, finally, the presumption
was that women were weaker than men, both mentally and physically. On the basis of these provisions, a complex theological concept maintaining the inferiority and inadequacy of women has been developed and was used to justify their subordinate position. The Bible and Aristotelian philosophy were the cornerstone of that ideology.

The Bible had rich material to support the idea of insufficiency of the female nature. Based on the story of the expulsion from Paradise, derived from Old Testament, theologians pointed out that Eve was created after Adam. Theologians emphasized Eve’s role in the original sin and discussed, if God breathed a soul into her. Thus, the early Christian classic, one of the founders of misogynist tradition, Tertullian, argued that Eve’s fault could not be corrected until the world existed. These basic ideas were used to understand the subordination of women to men, and to minimize women’s role in the society.

The New Testament also provided many examples to support patriarchal ideology. One of the most influential apostles, Paul, pointed out the subordinate role of women in relation to men. He preached: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” (I Cor. 11: 3); "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (I Tim. 2: 12); "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Saviour of the body”. (Eph. 5: 22-23); ”

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60 Michael Masi, *Chaucer and Gender* (Peter Lang, 2005), 3.
62 Michael Masi, *Chaucer and Gender* (Peter Lang, 2005), 3.
64 Le Goff, *Tsivilizatsiya srednevekovogo Zapada [The civilization of the medieval West]*, 11.
66 Ibid., 6.
Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband” (Eph. 5:33).

Moreover, Aristotle’s and Thomas Aquinas’s writings played an important role in the perception of the nature of women and their role in the society in an almost entirely male-dominated world. Aristotle believed that a woman, in comparison to a man, is somewhat of an unfinished creature, the “unfinished” man. Therefore, "women are less spiritual, more simple-minded, but also more vindictive, malicious, unrestrained". This idea was then developed in the Middle Ages, when scholars argued that women were defective due to the lack of “proper” developed male genitals. They would never become complete beings (assuming males’ as perfect and complete); therefore, women were weaker psychologically and intellectually. Girls were thought to be born because of the special “female” sperm that was weaker than the supposedly normal one. Moreover, due to the physiological characteristics of female bodies, women were believed to think fast in a short time period, but incapable of making serious decisions. Thomas Aquinas argued that feminine characters are corporal, passive ones, whereas male characters are active ones. Based on that reasoning he believed that the woman’s soul cannot be equated to the soul of the man. Generally, it was believed that women could not take care of themselves, so men should take care of them instead. Isidore of Seville pointed out that the word «vir» («Man») comes from the word «vis» («force»), and the word "woman" is derived

67 Ryabova, Zhenshchina v istorii zapadnoevropeyskogo Srednevekov’ya [The woman in the history of Western European Middle Ages], 15.
70 Alcuin Blamires, Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender (Oxford University Press, 2006), 70–72.
71 Ryabova, Zhenshchina v istorii zapadnoevropeyskogo Srednevekov’ya [The woman in the history of Western European Middle Ages], 16.
72 Ibid., 96–97.
from the adjective meaning "soft, pampered, weak". Combining Aristotelian, Aquinas’s, and biblical ideas, Christian scholars could justify the inferiority of the status of women in society.

Women were thought guilty because of they were women. It was believed that they did not have nobility, as this was a male characteristic. Moreover, women were treated as a source of evil and crime. Women were restless, curious, intemperate, greedy, and chatty. Lust as a sin, was most closely associated with females, and lustful women were dangerous for males. It allowed for a context in which women were perceived as objects of sexual pleasure, upon who the male, as a subject, performs an action. Women were even treated as responsible for male lust as they provoked it.

A woman in marriage must be submissive to a man and follow his will. A husband has unlimited power over his wife, therefore she can only pray humbly to him, so as to keep peace in the house. The Church considered women as very dangerous for their husbands, as they were a

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73 Ibid., 70.
75 Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, 134.
78 Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, 132–133.
82 Karras, *Common Women*, 110.
symbol of temptation and, therefore, of sin.\textsuperscript{85} Thus, relations of domination and subordination were sanctioned by God in order to control women.\textsuperscript{86} Innocent III writes that wife in marriage is always envious and ambitious, she loves outfits and the luxury and needs to be controlled. In one of his treatises, he explains one out of three reasons of divorce as an "evil wife."\textsuperscript{87} Gerard of Cambrai supported the idea of the unconditioned subordination of wife to her husband as a necessary condition of a successful marriage.\textsuperscript{88} Augustine states that a marriage is only “remedy against sin”, inherited in women, as it can protect from fornication, which was seen as a lack of control.\textsuperscript{89}

Fidelity is one of the most important virtues of wives, unlike for men, who were allowed to commit adultery.\textsuperscript{90} If he does it with a lower status woman, a wife should not feel offended or insulted, because the church does not consider it a serious sin.\textsuperscript{91} On the other hand, in the strictly hierarchical family structure of the Middle Ages, where all power were attributed to the males, women’s adultery could lead to death.\textsuperscript{92}

At the same time, the Bible provides examples of cooperation and the importance of union between males and females\textsuperscript{93} as well as some “positive” images of women such as Judith, Esther, Mary, Samaritan woman, and of course, Maria Magdalena, whose cult was widespread in the

\textsuperscript{85} Karras, Common Women, 103.
\textsuperscript{86} Opits, “Zhenshchina v zerkale pozdnesrednevsekovoy agiografii [Woman in the mirror of the late medieval hagiography]," 57.
\textsuperscript{87} Ryabova, Zhenshchina v istorii zapadnoyevropeyskogo Srednevekov'y [The woman in the history of Western European Middle Ages], 26.
\textsuperscript{88} Opits, “Zhenshchina v zerkale pozdnesrednevsekovoy agiografii [Woman in the mirror of the late medieval hagiography]," 55.
\textsuperscript{90} Ryabova, Zhenshchina v istorii zapadnoyevropeyskogo Srednevekov'y [The woman in the history of Western European Middle Ages], 33.
\textsuperscript{91} Jean Claude Bolon, Istorya bezbrachiya i kholostyakov [The history of celibacy and single man] (Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2010), 138.
\textsuperscript{92} Ryabova, Zhenshchina v istorii zapadnoyevropeyskogo Srednevekov'y [The woman in the history of Western European Middle Ages], 118.
\textsuperscript{93} Masi, Chaucer and Gender, 2005, 7.
Middle Ages. There were attempts to reduce negative attitudes towards women by stressing the importance of women in society. Apostle Paul claims that in the kingdom of God there is no division on men and women; furthermore, he accepted the possibility for women to hold church positions. Also didactic stories sometimes contained stories about good, virtuous women. Motherhood was highly valued by society. Hildegard of Bingen also tried to change the idea of women’s inferiority. Although many religious texts could potentially provide different interpretations of the position of women in society, the largest part of the religious attitude was remarkably misogynist. Moreover, images of “good” wives and women and their roles in constructing women’s images are complicated as they reinforced the dichotomy “holy woman versus wicked woman” and, thus, misogyny.

The canon law sought to protect women and provided for them some autonomy from husbands. The church insisted that marriage must come through voluntary consent of both spouses. The idea that both sexes are responsible for marriage emerged due to the notion that not only a woman is the source of all wicked things and actions. It was even claimed that spouses could mutually criticize each other. Hagiographic tradition is also contradictory and

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94 Ibid., 6.
95 Ryabova, Zhenshchina v istorii zapadnoevropeyskogo Srednevekov’ya [The woman in the history of Western European Middle Ages], 10–11.
96 Abramson, “Sem’ya v real’noy zhizni i v sisteme tsennostnykh oriyentatsiy v yuzhnoital’yanском obshchestve X-XIII vv. [Family in real life and in the system of value orientations in the southern Italian society of X-XIII centuries],” 48–49.
97 Rigby, Chaucer in Context, 131.
98 Masi, Chaucer and Gender, 2005, 15.
99 Karras, Common Women, 104.
101 Ibid., 153.
102 Ibid., 158.
does not always show the subordination of women.\textsuperscript{103} Considering all of these trends, Blamires concludes that the idea of equality in marriage was in present already in 14\textsuperscript{th} Century.\textsuperscript{104}

Overall, the Catholic Church tended to reinforce the idea of the imperfectness of women, as well as their weak and evil nature. They were seen as sinful and dangerous for the male dominated society. The priests preached limitation of women’ rights and behaviour as control over women was seen as a way to protect males from women’s corrupted nature. Thus, the ideal wife was thought as a submissive and silent woman, who must follow her husband’s will.

1.2. Legal status of English women

The ultimate goal of this section is to show what legal rights women had in society. As women did not have legal rights to participate in political or administrative positions, I will focus on other spheres, where women could be seen. However, it is important to understand that the rights I will discuss could play (and actually played) a huge role in improving women’s positions and enabling them to gain public presence. Property rights and basically all women activities were measured on the scale of marriage, therefore I will discuss their rights in that context. Also, I want to point out that the legal rights or restrictions do not mean necessarily that they were implemented and worked properly. This evidence is only based on legal documents. The reality of it on day-to-day life will be investigated in the next subchapter.

The right to have equal inheritance rights for women was never a question in London legislative practices.\textsuperscript{105} The rights for equal inheritance for daughters and sons of the same family

\textsuperscript{103} Opits, “Zhenshchina v zerkale pozdnesrednevekovoy agiografii [Woman in the mirror of the late medieval hagiography],” 55–61.
\textsuperscript{104} Blamires, \textit{Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender}, 159.
\textsuperscript{105} Hanawalt, \textit{The Wealth of Wives}, 2007, 54.
was demanded. According to the wills of London aldermen fixing the transfer of part of their property to children, women not only inherited money and household items, but also real estate, including house trade items.\textsuperscript{106} Generally, London laws were positive for daughters, wives, and widows, especially if one is to compare the situation with other countries, such as Italy, for example.\textsuperscript{107}

Property rights for women were also numerous. Women had rights to use property as unmarried women after their husband’s death.\textsuperscript{108} They also kept the rights for leased property in those cases\textsuperscript{109}. Wives could legally own real estates (to sell, to buy or lease).\textsuperscript{110} The laws did not distinguish between genders in terms of property ownership.\textsuperscript{111} These rights were not dependent on marital status, that is, unmarried women benefited from it too.\textsuperscript{112} Moreover, a husband could not alienate common property without his wife’s consent.\textsuperscript{113} The wife also had the right to receive at least third part of husband’s movable goods.\textsuperscript{114} Thus in London, women had many opportunities to exercise their property rights.

Women in medieval England, and especially in London, had numerous possibilities to choose their ways of lives and to improve (at least, as the laws say) their economic positions. A special legal and social category for women emerged, namely "femmes sole."\textsuperscript{115} It was a category of women, including married women who, according to English law, were economically

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{109} Hanawalt, \textit{The Wealth of Wives}, 2007, 64.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{112} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 24.
\textsuperscript{113} Helen M. Jewell, \textit{Women in Medieval England} (Manchester University Press, 1996), 107.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
independent,\textsuperscript{116} because the law openly allowed them to trade.\textsuperscript{117} Women could run their own business, they were responsible for their own debts and credits, which they could take.\textsuperscript{118} They could enter guilds and become apprentices.\textsuperscript{119} They also had their own seals for running business.\textsuperscript{120} Women, according to London laws, could negotiate the wage with both men and women.\textsuperscript{121} They were referred to as “freewomen of the city”, this term speaks by itself. Chernova shows that the legal status of urban women, who had important property rights, provided higher independence and autonomy within the family and the society.\textsuperscript{122}

However, it would be far-fetched to say that it was a complete freedom for women. There were low positions and chances for poor rural women from villages, or for high class women. Some researchers suggest that high class women were more restricted as they were used as goods in bride markets, where men searched for better economic position by marriage with proper women. In such cases women’s freedom could be strictly limited and even prohibited. Thus, laws also established many limitations for women, which definitely restricted and dismissed many of their rights.\textsuperscript{123} Hereby, I demonstrated that women in Medieval London, the city where Chaucer was born and spent most of his time, had relatively good property rights. They could inherit family property equally. Moreover, they had the right to run a business and perform financial transactions on a full scale. Also, the law recognized them as independent entrepreneurs, thus, women could lead their businesses autonomously. Having acknowledged that medieval women had also numerous severe legal restrictions, I showed that they had potential advantages in that

society. In the next subchapter, I will examine what kind of presence women had in English society.

1.3. English women’s economic situation and public presence

In this subchapter I aim to show how the legal rights described above were implemented in real life. I will show that women’s active involvement in economic life increased their autonomy and agency, and thereby, their public presence and visibility. I will start with the economic situation, continue with describing major historical, and then will outline women’s active participation in the economic life.

One of the big events that influenced women’s life in Medieval England was the outbreak of the Black Death. The death of around half of the country’s entire population had a significant effect on women. Jewell asserts that women’s conditions changed dramatically, focusing on the marriage delays that women could take. However, the most important impact was seen in the labor situation. As horizontal relations replaced to some extent vertical ones, this broadened women’s options to choose their way of life, to increase their visibility. In the second part of XIV century, according to guilds regulation documents, they started to take “male” jobs. Therefore, they took more opportunities to access the labor market.

128 Ibid., 27.
Another important factor was a specific marriage pattern that was common in this part of Europe, namely the northwest marriage pattern, which is widely discussed in the scholarship.\textsuperscript{129} Beattie allocates several main characteristics, that is, “men and women marry ‘late’ (in their mid to late twenties) someone of their own age; they set up their own household on marriage; before marriage they often circulate between households as life-cycle servants, and a significant proportion never marry”.\textsuperscript{130} Some scholars have argued that this delay was caused by numerous jobs which were available to young women.\textsuperscript{131} Before marriage they already had some sort of social capital and life experience, and could secure their position by making their own savings.\textsuperscript{132} This meant they felt freer and could stand against the will of the opposite sex. The way in which socialization for women happened was what led to the empowerment of women.\textsuperscript{133}

The very special position of women was seen in the way in which marriage issues were organized. Before marriage future spouses usually met several times and the woman’s opinion was considered just as important. After marriage the family acquire a common house, not an already existing one, into which the new wife would move.\textsuperscript{134} Also, the material resources of both families in case of marriage were combined together without big emphasis on the husband’s dominance of these.\textsuperscript{135} Thus, a wife entered a house in an almost equal position to that of males. As Hanawalt concludes, women’s contribution to the household economy was crucial for the

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\textsuperscript{130} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 33–34.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{134} Hanawalt, \textit{The Wealth of Wives}, 2007, 69.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 70.
survival of the family. An experienced woman, having material resources, was not an easy target for suppression and discrimination.

This relatively independent position of women in the family led to the creation of a common business, where women often were equal partners alongside their husbands. The situation, when spouses cooperated and dealt with business together, was in fact quite common. Considering the legal rights that allowed women to be businesswomen, it was likely to happen. Wives were seen as persons who were responsible for fair business and husbands tended to trust them. Moreover, in the case of a husband’s absence from London, the wife looked after the family business. They were assumed to have all necessary characteristics in order to run the business efficiently. Russian scientist Chernova concludes that the wives of representatives of the urban elite members of the large merchant companies of London, often acted as agents of their husbands and other relatives. Indeed they performed all functions, paid debts, as well as made serious commercial transactions. This is why Hanawalt’s estimation that a third of all financial and trade operations in London in 14th century was made by the enterprise run jointly by wife and husband seems convincing.

Another aspect of women’s participation in economic activities was connected with medieval gilds and practices of apprenticeship. McIntosh shows that there is constant evidence of women’s participation in gild activities as apprentices. The conditions for married, single, and

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136 Ibid., 117.
widowed women were different\textsuperscript{144}, however, almost all had access to apprenticeships. Married women received some benefits in the form of reduced fees if their husbands were members of that guild.\textsuperscript{145} Moreover, they could also enjoy the same privileges that were granted to their husbands.\textsuperscript{146} The easiest way to become a member of a guild was provided for widows as well, who inherited the position held by their dead husbands.\textsuperscript{147} A single woman could become a member too and in order to so, she had to pay the same amount of money as her male counterparts.\textsuperscript{148} Overall, the conditions in which women became apprentices were the same conditions as those under which males did.\textsuperscript{149} Beattie argues that a single woman as a member of a gild enjoyed much more economic and legal independence than a married woman.\textsuperscript{150} Participation in gilds helped women access certain benefits and privileges, and helped secure their status\textsuperscript{151} as well as establish a good reputation so as to have access to credits and running businesses.\textsuperscript{152}

This relatively good position of women led to a significantly large influence of women in the society. They were active in financial operations. Women lent or borrowed money,\textsuperscript{153} thus, they were involved in credit obligations.\textsuperscript{154} They were also allowed to rent out property to secure their financial status.\textsuperscript{155} McIntosh states that women could go before the court to claim their

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{145} Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith M. Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages: Fifty Years after Marian K. Dale,” \textit{Signs} 14, no. 2 (January 1, 1989): 478.
\textsuperscript{146} Jewel, \textit{Women in Medieval England}, 106.
\textsuperscript{147} Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith M. Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages: Fifty Years after Marian K. Dale,” \textit{Signs} 14, no. 2 (January 1, 1989): 478.
\textsuperscript{148} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 105.
\textsuperscript{149} Kowaleski and Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages,” January 1, 1989, 477.
\textsuperscript{150} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 112.
\textsuperscript{151} Kowaleski and Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages,” January 1, 1989, 475.
\textsuperscript{152} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 98.
\textsuperscript{153} McIntosh, \textit{Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620}, 86.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 85.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 114.
money.\textsuperscript{156} Even if the husband’s consent was required to the possibility for women to take credit, women, especially in London, could become a guarantor for another person taking a loan.\textsuperscript{158}

The category “sengle woman” appeared in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{159} and played an important role in the increasing visibility of women in public places. As Lewell asserts, married women in the status of \textit{femmes sole} could operate in a wide range of trade and financial operations, being quite independent economically.\textsuperscript{160} Single female entrepreneurs paid the same taxes as males\textsuperscript{161} and their husbands could not interfere with their business.\textsuperscript{162} This category shows the variety of life paths that English Medieval women had at their disposal.\textsuperscript{163}

Many of the London women were independent craftswomen.\textsuperscript{164} Hanawalt, by analyzing courts petitions, shows that widows strived for independence and could achieve it by “negotiating on their own”.\textsuperscript{165} Women were involved in various activities connected with goods selling\textsuperscript{166} and had their own seals for it.\textsuperscript{167} Women had important positions in ale brewing, especially in big towns and cities.\textsuperscript{168} The market provided opportunities for women to work as commercial brewers.\textsuperscript{169} They usually sold it from their house or on the street.\textsuperscript{170} Women also produced various goods, such as silk and malt. Widows became traders in inn-keeping, silk making, embroidery

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{159} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 147.
\textsuperscript{160} Jewell, \textit{Women in Medieval England}, 90.
\textsuperscript{161} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 76.
\textsuperscript{163} Beattie, \textit{Medieval Single Women}, 148.
\textsuperscript{164} McIntosh, \textit{Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620}, 134.
\textsuperscript{165} Hanawalt, \textit{The Wealth of Wives}, 2007, 110.
\textsuperscript{166} McIntosh, \textit{Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620}, 124.
\textsuperscript{168} McIntosh, \textit{Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620}, 147.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 147–148.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 156–157.
etc. Women were seen in daily retail trades. It was not easy to secure their places in the markets, but in some cases they managed.

In this light, the example of London silk-worker does not seem exceptional. Their work was seen as a trade and craft. Silk-work demanded long apprenticeship and women did not stop doing it, even after marriage. Surprisingly enough, as Kowaleski and Bennett notice, this work was seen as a high status work. Women, involved in such an occupation, were respected in society. Therefore, these “businesswomen” had the right to appeal Crown, hold their workshops etc.

Moreover, women were also active in Church activities. They participated in fundraising initiatives, which they could organize themselves. They could clean the Church, organize preparations for the services, decorate the Church building and take care of the flowers. The Parish offered women chances for collective association.

Although the positions of woman were relatively strong and their influence and visibility in the public sphere was also high, it would be idealistic to say that it was complete freedom. In a patriarchal society it is difficult to imagine that the whole patriarchal mechanism of domination would allow women to enjoy full rights. In the workplace women still occupied lower-level positions and very often their relative prosperity was heavily dependent on males’ will. Even when employed, women had to work very hard, suffering from low status and earning low

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172 Ibid., 185.
173 McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620*, 129.
174 Kowaleski and Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages,” January 1, 1989, 480.
178 Ibid.
salaries. Successful and prosperous women tended to be paid less, they were more influenced by market fluctuations and thus, were more likely to be terminated. Beattie believes that women were forced to work, rather than them doing so voluntarily, she reasons that, perhaps, it was men who delayed marriage as they wanted women to have some dowry before it took place. Privileges, granted by gild to women, were also incomparable with male benefits. Considering that gilds still were males’ community, they were predominantly occupied by males; women never had their own gilds. Gilds also restricted women because they were interested in women as members rather than skilled workers, which meant that women were used as a way to secure their husband’s status. All these investigations allowed Bennett to conclude that the “golden age” for women was overestimated and in fact, the situation of women remained in many cases unpleasant and difficult. They still suffered from patriarchal oppressive structures.

In the beginning of the 14th century and onwards, researchers noticed the increase of women visibility in land market. Women in England were heavily involved in market economy outside their homes. Philips estimates that in the textile and clothing production, independent women workers occupied between 48 and 68 per cent of the positions. Some women from lower classes could generate their own income. All women participated in such activities, even married and relatively rich ones. Hanawalt claims that “women in London were in a unique position to have an impact on the city’s growing economy in the late Middle Ages”.

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181 Karras, Common Women, 5–6.
182 Beattie, Medieval Single Women, 36.
183 Kowaleski and Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages,” January 1, 1989, 476.
184 Ibid., 479–480.
186 Philips, Medieval Maidens, 125.
187 Ibid, 130.
188 McIntosh, Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620, 4.
All women from all social classes performed some kind of service work, be it paid or unpaid, for the family, or for other people, as a part of socialization, which could in turn improve their economic positions.\textsuperscript{190} The increased involvement of women in economic activities as workers, traders, financial performers, and as partners in their husbands’ enterprises, etc. led to a dramatic increase of women’s visibility in the public sphere and in society altogether.

Despite men’s negative attitude to women’s active participation in the labor market,\textsuperscript{191} many women rejected it and continued to work.\textsuperscript{192} In documents of the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, positive words were used to describe women’s positioning in labor, financial, or trade market. McIntosh points out, that words, such as “reputation”, “standing”, “good name” were used equally for men and women.\textsuperscript{193} Women used petitions to protect their craft.\textsuperscript{194} They were seen through courts documents, petitions and other written documentation.\textsuperscript{195} Hanawalt adds that women were always seen in the streets buying food and other goods or selling their produce.\textsuperscript{196} Women were quite independent in their economic activities as businesswomen and had an impact on all aspects of the London economy,\textsuperscript{197} thus, they were seen in public.\textsuperscript{198}

All of these facts show that women were visible in the public sphere. They were actively involved in the economic life and thus, were active outside the domestic sphere. Legal status and economic conditions allowed them to transgress family boundaries in order to express themselves in society. Moreover, they acted as independent businesswomen who had all opportunities to be wholly responsible for their activities performing all sorts of financial, production, and trade

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\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{190} Phillips, \textit{Medieval Maidens}, 108.
    \item \textsuperscript{191} McIntosh, \textit{Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620}, 104.
    \item \textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 5.
    \item \textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 10.
    \item \textsuperscript{194} Kowaleski and Bennett, “Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages,” January 1, 1989, 480–481.
    \item \textsuperscript{195} Hanawalt, \textit{The Wealth of Wives}, 2007, 13.
    \item \textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 156.
    \item \textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 159.
    \item \textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 215.
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operations in the Medieval English market, especially London. This visibility influenced Chaucer’s mind-set significantly as he faced these women throughout his life. In the next subchapter, I will outline Chaucer’s life and show the intersection of his life and these tendencies.

1.4. Chaucer’s life in the historical reality

In this part I will outline the main stages of Chaucer’s life in order to show that women’s visibility and presence as described earlier, were seen by the poet and this was reflected in the *Canterbury Tales*. I will show that Chaucer lived at intersection of different social classes and different social positions, where he faced different women, including those discussed earlier in this chapter. This experience made him listen to women’s voices and their presence and existence were very present in his mind.

Chaucer was part of the burger family third generation. His grandfather was a successful wine merchant.\(^{199}\) In short, they were tightly connected with the wine merchants’ corporation.\(^ {200}\) His father carried on the family business and was relatively close to the royal court.\(^ {201}\) He travelled in the retinue of Edward III in Flanders, then he was appointed assistant royal cupbearer.\(^ {202}\) D. Brewer calls him "a prosperous merchant".\(^ {203}\)

Geoffrey Chaucer grew up surrounded by various social types, of which London was full at the time, especially in the area where he lived. He saw a many sailors, merchants, and foreigners.\(^ {204}\) His acquaintance with the court and with nobility began from a very early age.\(^ {205}\)


\(^{200}\) Jean Jusserand, *Istoriya angliyskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature]* (Moskva: URSS, 2009), 195.

\(^{201}\) Ibid.


\(^{203}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{204}\) Ibid., 38.
All this also affected a young Jeffrey, expanding his horizons, showing him people of different classes, whose behavior he had the chance opportunity to compare with others. In this environment, women also acted as businesswomen or traders, selling various goods on the streets or from their homes too.

At the age of 7 he began to study. When he was 17 years old, under his father’s patronage, Chaucer was enrolled to cover a position at the court of Queen Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, wife of the third son of Edward III Prince Lionel. Chaucer became friends with the son of King John of Gaunt, and earned higher education, which naturally was an aristocratic privilege.

In 1359 Chaucer participated in his first foreign campaign in France. During the 1360-1366 J. Chaucer’s career in the Royal Court continued to progress. When he returned he was appointed as Edward’s valet, and then his squire. He was paid a salary of 20 pounds for the past and future work. His arms and equipment were the same as those of a noble knight.

Eventually he became a diplomat and started to travel regularly, performing a variety of different orders for the king and the government. His first trip was in 1366 in Navarre, and then he travelled in 1370 to Flanders and France. In 1372 he was in France, Genoa and Florence to sign commercial arrangements. Then a mysterious trip to Italy in 1373, the purpose of which is

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206 Brewer, The World of Chaucer, 63–64.
207 Ibid., 69.
208 Jusserand, Istoriya angliskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature], 197.
210 Jusserand, Istoriya angliskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature], 198.
211 Ward, Chaucer, 51.
212 Brewer, The World of Chaucer, 76.
213 Ibid., 86.
214 Jusserand, Istoriya angliskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature], 206–207.
still unknown.\textsuperscript{215} Finally, he travelled again to Italy in 1377 and 1378.\textsuperscript{216} This new experience helped Chaucer explore other cultures, foreign customs and significantly broaden the narrow scope of traditional consciousness attributed to the people of the middle Ages.

After the first trip, we find his name in the list of those who had the right to receive royal payment in 1368.\textsuperscript{217} The year before he got a new award, the title of Esquire,\textsuperscript{218} and full of value service appointment.\textsuperscript{219} Besides this, he was enrolled in the king’s retinue in 1369 too.\textsuperscript{220} After a trip in 1373, he was awarded honors and awards (including a daily jug of wine over a lifetime, which was replaced by cash payments).\textsuperscript{221}

After a successful diplomatic career Chaucer began to work as an official. He was promoted to supervisor of fees and subsidies and granted a house in a prestigious area of London.\textsuperscript{222} Since 1385 the poet was appointed as a magistrate (Justice of Peace).\textsuperscript{223} Then, in order to fight Gloucester’s rising (enemy of John of Gaunt)\textsuperscript{224} Chaucer was elected Member of Parliament in the county of Kent.\textsuperscript{225} During the period of John of Gaunt’s proscription. Chaucer left his jobs. However, in 1389 he returned to the king’s service as chief superintendent of the royal building works. Having worked there until 1391, he moved to work as manager of the royal estate in Greenwich.\textsuperscript{226}

\textsuperscript{215} Brewer, \textit{The World of Chaucer}, 120.
\textsuperscript{216} Jusserand, \textit{Istoriya angliyskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature]}, 207.
\textsuperscript{217} Brewer, \textit{The World of Chaucer}, 91.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 106–107.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{222} Jusserand, \textit{Istoriya angliyskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature]}, 277.
\textsuperscript{223} Ward, \textit{Chaucer}, 78–79.
\textsuperscript{224} Jusserand, \textit{Istoriya angliyskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature]}, 370–371.
\textsuperscript{225} Brewer, \textit{The World of Chaucer}, 181.
\textsuperscript{226} Jusserand, \textit{Istoriya angliyskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature]}, 391.
Chaucer gained recognition as a royal official and became a regular member of the royal court and was in this position for ten years. New King Richard II did not forget about the poet either and granted him a pension of 20 pounds and confirmed the issuance of a daily jug of wine in 1394. He even had a special royal letter, which protected him from persecutions. In this period, Chaucer had a relatively strong financial position, as he had several more or less permanent awards.

Throughout his entire life, Chaucer went through numerous social positions. Indeed, as Patterson notes, Chaucer’s social position was anomalous. Strohm also indicates that Chaucer’s position was contradictory as he was in between aristocracy and merchants. The variety of social circles Chaucer was involved in, as Strohm argues, led to the multiplicity of voices and views in his writings.

In this chapter I wanted to show how women’s positions in Medieval England and London influenced Chaucer’s writings. In order to do so, I showed that the Church created the image of evil dangerous women, who should be contended by males. As women were seen as inherently malicious, it was believed that men should control them. The Church imposed submissive behavior for women and introduced only two possible and righteous ways of living for them. The best being to leave the social world and live in a monastery; the second being marriage. Marriage was highly regulated and it was thought of as a place of male dominance. A wife had follow her husband’s orders, and had to be silent and humble. However, the reality of

227 Ward, Chaucer, 65.
228 Jusserand, Istoriya angiyskogo naroda v yego literature [History of the English people in their literature], 212.
229 Ward, Chaucer, 108.
230 Ibid., 109.
231 Ibid., 76.
232 Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, 32.
234 Ibid., 40–41.
Medieval England deeply challenged these moral values. London and English laws provided numerous possibilities for women to act independently in economic life, which led to a large involvement of women in such activities. Women participated in trade, financial operations, and land market. They could perform a wide range of economic activities. Moreover, they could be legal partners to their husbands, or could run their enterprises autonomously. This means that women were highly visible in the Medieval English social landscape. Chaucer, as a person deeply connected with the social life of London and England, who was a public figure throughout his career, faced all of these women and their public activities were imprinted in his mind-set. Thus, his usage of language, embedded in established moral values and ideals, worked insufficiently to combine the real Chaucer’s experience and moral values. This tension led to ruptures in depiction of women in the *Canterbury Tales*. In the following chapter I will show those ruptures and distortions, which reveal the non-passive submissiveness of Chaucer’s submissive women.
Chapter 2. Non-passive submissiveness. Cases of three Chaucer’s women

2.1. Constance between submissiveness and autonomy

“The Man of Law’s Tale” is a story about the daughter of the Roman Emperor Constance, who is arranged to get married to a pagan Sultan. She faces many misfortunes when her chastity and life are threatened. By God’s will and her faith, she overcomes all obstacles and becomes the wife of a noble king, meets her father and dies happy. It is a traditional story, where woman is thought to exemplify God’s power and adherence to the religion, which eventually helps her to survive. In what follows, I will show that Constance’s submissiveness contains elements which can be seen as active attitude towards the life and expression of her subjectivity, thus, her image is distorted and inconsistent.

At the beginning of the story, Constance seems completely silent. When the negotiations between the Sultan and the Emperor begin, Constance is removed from those activities. She is beautiful, but she does not decide anything. It is a male world where Constance does not have a right to speak up. Only God can help her (Now, fair Constance, Almighty God the guyde!)\(^{235}\). Men arrange everything and women always merely agree.

However, Constance expressed worries. She is very nervous about her future and what will happen next (“Ful pale arist and dresseth hir to wende, / For wel sche saugh ther nas non other wende”).\(^{236}\) After this, she appeals to her father and claims that she completely agrees with his decision. But the way in which she agrees is very unusual. In fact, she expresses her unwillingness to go, she questions her father’s authority and challenges the righteousness of his

\(^{236}\) Ibid.
decision. While claiming her complete submission to her father (“And ye, my mooder, my
soverayn plesaunce / Over al thing Crist on loft; / Constaunce your child hir recomaundeth ofte /
Unto your grace, for I schal into Surrie”),\textsuperscript{237} she says that she has to go to that barbaric nation, but
only because of her father’s will (“Allas, unto the barbre nacioun I most anoon, sethens it is your
wille”).\textsuperscript{238} She continues to complain, saying she is “wrecched” woman, born for “thraldam and
penaunce / and to ben under man’s governaunce”.\textsuperscript{239} She explicitly agrees with her father, but at
the same time, she expresses her dislike of this state of affairs. She identifies herself as “wrecce
woman”, that is, an indication of her subjectivity and her reflective ability to consider herself and
the world around her.\textsuperscript{240}

Her entire speech signifies the efforts to change father’s attitude. It is revealed through
her seemingly passive behaviour that she wants her father’s decision. The very open claim shows
that she does not like to get married. Constance reflects upon her conditions, she understands that
this forceful moving is not good for her. It means that Constance sees her situation as bad. If she
recognizes this as a “bad” situation, this inevitably leads to the conclusion that she knows what
“good” situation is. She estimates that open rebellion cannot work in this society, where women
are only assumed to obey silently. Therefore, she follows another tactic when she wants to
convey her desperate conditions in order to convince her father to let her stay at home.

It means that this submissiveness is just a deception and a game in order to achieve a
personal interest. In that light, her references to Christ are used to justify her oppressed position
that should help her to change her father’s decision. The important issue here is not that her
efforts are insufficient, but that she actually takes pains to do anything. Constance plays her own

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{240} Cox, \textit{Gender and Language in Chaucer}, 72.
game, and she is not just a mechanism of men’s games. Of course, men consider her in this way, but she considers herself differently. The difference is that Constance does not want the destiny prepared for her by man.

Her non-passive resistance is even more noticeable if one recognizes that the narrator also supports her lamentations about her destiny. He somehow joins her in her complains and understands her misfortune. The narrator, during four stanzas, emphasizes her destiny by using such words and phrases as “slayn this marriage”, “infortunat ascendant tortuous”, “unhappy been thi paas”. Moreover, he blames the father, “Inprudent emperour of Rome”, for choosing this destiny for his daughter.241 The narrator sees her as a real figure and he is worried about her.

A strange situation occurs with her rescue from the massacre organized be her first husband’s mother. Constance survives by hiding in the ship and heading onto the sea. In such a desperate condition she claims her adherence to God, who is “that kyng of heven, with his woundes newe”242. Moreover, he is “the white lamb that hurt was with a spere, / Flemer of feendes out of him and here”. The God she imagines is not only a “limb”, bit a very active being, who can get rid of his enemies if it is needed. Then she claims: “Me kepe, and gif me might my lyf to menden!”243 She uses a verb “menden”, which means an improvement, repairing. This verb implies the idea that the things, she believes, will get better. One should assume as far as she says it in context of glorification of God, she seeks this improvement from him, she does not expect herself to do something. However, she asks him not to improve her life, but to give her the will to do it by herself. She is religious, but in that sense her religious faith is a very active faith. Even if she waits for God’s support, she understands that it is up to her to change the situation.

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243 Ibid.
I can see the same pattern in her discussion with her father. Under hidden submissiveness, Constance performs active behaviour. There are no chances to claim her rights openly. She has to be cunning, those are the conditions of her survival. Her agency must be performed this way, because of the environment in which she exists. Her agency and autonomy put her in this position of action masked by submissiveness. As those women of Medieval England, who had to struggle against a patriarchal society in order to secure their lives by adjusting and slowly changing their conditions, Constance does the same. Through this active attitude her destiny is distorted. A person, who is assumed to be a complete follower of God’s destiny, whatsoever happens, shows an active approach to life. The narrator understands her behaviour as problematic, therefore, he needs to emphasize during the next five stanzas that she overcomes all of her obstacles because of God. Readers should understand clearly, that it is not she, who can do something to save her life, it is all God’ will.

These inconsistencies occur throughout the whole story. After arriving to a new place, she does not explain her life and where she is from (But what sche was, sche wolde no man seye / For foul ne faire, though sche scholde deye)

She creates a narrative as to why she does not remember. It is because she “forgat hir mynde”, which shows her wiliness and desire to hide herself. In this “hire trowthe” one can see her real subjectivity, which bursts through the narrative of submissive saint woman. She behaves in a way through which she can guide her life to avoid dangers and threats to her life. Constance is able to evaluate the situation and to make a concrete decision. Even if her decision is explained as dictated by God, it is her own way to achieve what God wishes. Thus, she is not only in a safe place, but her hidden faith and her own chastity help to convert her saviours.

\[\text{Ibid., 174.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 175.}\]
The story about the miracle, which should show God’s might, in fact, shows Constance’s might, because she is a focus here. Her presence helps to create the miracle, it is she who explains what happened and why. So, God is a name here, an abstract idea, whereas Constance is real and made of flesh. She promotes his will, and she is in the centre of the story, a person, who helps God, but her subjectivity and agency help her to advance God and her own destiny. This is why she can avoid rape and the corruption of her holy devotion. Mann notices that in the situation of potential rape, Constance can be very active in defending her chastity. Thus, the miracle of converting an old man to Christianity happens in her presence and because of her influence. And it is this miracle that also convinces other people to accept Christianity.

The impact of her non-passive submissiveness is seen when she is falsely accused of a murder. The narrator says:

Among the people, and seyn they can not gesse
That sche had doon so gret wikkednesse.

It is because of her virtues that nobody can “gesse” that she could be so “wikkednesse”. As she does so many good deeds, it is impossible to imagine that “sche had doon” such an evil action. This story is once again about how Constance builds her reputation as a good person and works to avoid any shortcomings to be better. It is again about her deeds and personality, rather than about Christ and religion.

Her reaction towards false convictions also proves her active attitude to life. Constance complains about her destiny by recognizing that this accusation is false. She again expresses her adherence to God, but at the very end she notices

If I be guultles of this felonye,

Therefore, Clasby asserts that she openly expresses her disagreement about false convictions placed upon her.\textsuperscript{249} According to Clasby, even if Constance accepts her destiny, she stands against the suffering people impose on her.\textsuperscript{250} It means that she understands her bad situation, and even more, she tries to change it.

The narrator feels this inconsistency, therefore, has to remind us again that it is not about Constance, but it is about God (“For but Crist upon the miracle kythe, / Withouten gilt thou schalt be slayn, as swithe”).\textsuperscript{251} The narrator wants to convince us that God is responsible for everything as it is his will to save or to kill Constance. In situations, when Constance threatens the actual presence of males in the narrative, when her actions, deeds and words move the whole story, the narrator feels anxiety, because it violates the order and norms. Thus, the endless reminders about chastity and God should be interpreted as a manifestation of male’s reaction to woman’s power. Thus, the more the narrator speaks about God’s power, the more it indicates that Constance is a subject with her own agency and autonomy.

But even these long narratives about God’s will in Constance’s behaviour cannot hide the rupture in her image. When she meet her second husband Alla, who in her opinion was guilty for her second escape in the sea, Constance shows herself as a subject.

\begin{quote}
So was hire herte schett in his distresse,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Whan sche remembred his unkyndenesse.\textsuperscript{252}
\end{quote}

She remembers everything that happens with her, because of him. Constance does not want to seem as though she has forgotten everything. For her, Alla performs his “unkydenesse”

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{249} Clasby, “Chaucer’s Constance,” 226.
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{251} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, 2002, 177.
\textsuperscript{252} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, 2002, 190.
and she has the consciousness to confront him. Constance wants him to recognize what he did in her life and how she suffers due to his actions. She sees herself as a person who has so much undeserved suffering and pain. Moreover, she forces her husband to admit it and pushes him to accept her suffering as legitimate. Through such behaviour, her image as a saintly woman is destroyed. One cannot see in her the holy woman, who follows any destiny Constance face. On the contrary, she speaks up, she expresses her displeasure towards the current state of affairs. This strategy works because Alla accepts her suffering. He recognizes her suffering and apologizes in an effort to convince her that he is not guilty (“So wisly on my soule have mercy, / That of youre harm as gulteles am I / As is Maurice my sone so lyk youre face / Elles the feend me fecche out of this place!”). These words mean that he accepts her subjectivity and her personality. Alla needs to apologize and to explain that it is not his fault that she suffers not because of him. Thus, he accepts her as a person, as an agent, who deserves a better life and who deserves apologizes. In this acceptance, he actually accepts something that she was trying to make happen throughout the entire story, namely her agency to resist the conditions of life and her subjectivity. If one is to look at Constance’s story as a story in which her subjectivity and agency evolves, one can see that in the end it has emerged. It was recognized by Alla, but also, it was recognized by the narrator, who does not speak about God, but about the rest of Constance’s life. Thus, the narrator does not stop telling the story after the happy meeting of Constance and Alla. He continues and finishes with her death. As she is a real person with genuine agency, the story must be ended like this.

In “The Man of Law’s Tale”, several ruptures occur, which destroy the coherence of Saint Constance. She is active as far as it is possible within the given circumstances; she raises

\[253\] Ibid.
her voice in efforts to change her life. She becomes a subject through her experience. The narrator tries to mitigate these unexpected distortions in order to maintain the coherence of her image, but he is unable to do so. In the end, these ruptures are dismissed. All heroes, including narrator, accept Constance as an agent and a subject, thus these ruptures become an inherent part of her personality and, in fact, reveal the agency of women at that time.

2.2. Grizeld between suffering and agential power

“The Clark’s Tale” is a story about Grizeld’s suffering in her marriage to the noble marquis, Walter. People of his land force him to marry, and he chooses a common woman, Grizeld. She takes a pledge that she will not complain no matter what Walter does to her in order to show him her love. Walter pretends to kill their son and daughter and then divorces her. Grizeld withstands all these challenges and Walter believes that she loves him. I argue that this story of the completely submissive Grizeld is a story of emerging subjectivity and agency, coming from her actions and speech, which can hardly be seen as submissive and passive.

The reason that people of the land come to Walter is connected with the future of the state. They are worried that he does not have an heir. A woman is an important part of a stable state, and that is why it is important to have a “proper” woman, who can give birth to a “proper” child. Communes are full of anxiety because of that situation (“Deliver us out of al this busy drede, / And take a wyf, for hire God’s sake”). Simply speaking, they need a woman in order to provide stability of the country. A woman symbolizes here the social obligations of the ruler, and she is a symbol of his commitments to his people, something that obliges him to perform his

duties. However, the marquis Walter does not want to fulfil his obligations because he considers marriage as a servitude (“that selden tyme is founde in marriage - / Ther I was fre; I mot ben in servage”). To this point, the story is about the relationship between a king and his people, and woman is a tool to mitigate the tensions between the people and their ruler. This political dimension was recognized by Hefferman, who asserts that Walter combines tyranny in public as well in domestic spheres.

Walter seems to accept the offer of his people, but he chooses his own way; he wants to show that he does not allow his people to suppress him and that they are irrelevant to this decision making. He has his condition, namely, his ability to choose any woman he wants (“Let me alloon in chesyng of my wif”). His eventual decision to find a poor, simple woman shows that his main idea is to convince the people that they are unable to rule without him. Their desire to rule and to control the ruler is not only unfair, but it cannot work. Thus, he needs this poor woman, who plays the role of the failed effort of the community to control him. Therefore, he demands her complete obedience and submissiveness. He wants to show his community what an ideal society under his government looks like. That is why he forces them to swear that they would obey his decision (“…thus schul ye swer, that ye / Ageins my chois schuln never grucche ne stryve”). Eventually, he wants to educate them.

In this sense, as Miller claims, Walter needs Grizeld as an instrument to achieve his goals. The communes behave too masculine in traditional way, because they try to impose their will on him, thus challenging his masculinity and right to govern. That is why he needs to “feminize” them, to force them to be submissive. A way to achieve this is to show the “proper”

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257 Heffernan, “Tyranny and Commune Profit in the ‘Clerk’s Tale,’” 335.
258 Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer*, 225.
way to behave. It is also about Walter’s masculinity, because he should be the only one who has the right to order and impose his will.

Grizeld is very good at governing a household. She helps her father and takes care of him, or cooks. She does everything to care for her father’s life. She serves her father without any challenges as the communes should serve Walter. Again, in this description, she is attached to her father, an idealized version of submissive and feminized “proper” communes, which are not supposed to rebel. Therefore, Walter wants to choose her as his wife. Grizeld is an ideal woman, but an ideal which the communes do not follow. He needs to show his communes the ideal way to be governed. Therefore Walter does not address his words to Grizeld. He does not expect her to answer or a conversation with him. She is voiceless as communes should be speechless. Walter asks her father about the marriage.

This is how the whole story becomes the story of the struggle between the “masculine” Walter and the extremely submissive and feminized Grizeld, who serves the purpose of the right pattern for the communes. He chooses her, because she seems weak and submissive; she presents no threat to his masculinity. It is the best example for rebellious communes to show how they should behave, and Walter’s demand of complete obedience from Grizeld parallels with his demands for the communes. By now she is a tool for his purposes, which he expresses in his conditions of marriage.

But Walter cannot just tell her to obey his authority, because her potential disagreement could threaten his masculinity. Therefore, he forces her to agree when they are alone by introducing his conditions:

I say this – be ye redy with good hert

To all my lust, and that I frely may

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As me best liste, do yow laughe or smert,

And never ye to gruch it night ne day,

And eek whan I say, ‘ye’, ye say not, ‘nay’,

Neyther by word, ne frowning countenaunce –

Swer this, and here I swer oure alliaunce.²⁶⁰

Just as he can preserve his masculinity before the extremely “feminized” wife, he can preserve his power (as another kind of masculinity) before his people. She is not seen as a separate character that has a separate and prominent role. She is an attachment to the plot, rather than someone important. She behaves properly, because she admits everything without any hesitations by saying: “And here I swere that never wityngly / In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye / For to be deed; though me were loth to deye”.²⁶¹ She reduces herself to a complete object. It seems that she presents the ideal that Walter wants to see. She is feminized, she has no possibility to rebel, because of her origin, and finally, she is bound by her oath. Walter’s masculinity is safe and the communes are put into their proper place. The ideal order is restored and everything seems fine. Therefore, Walter becomes much happier (Honoureth hir and loveth hir, I yow pray, / Whoso me loveth, ther is no more to say’).²⁶²

But, unexpectedly, Grizeld shows something different; her womanliness stops functioning as pure (or maybe it never was) submissiveness. Despite her low ancestry, she is a paragon of virtues. She behaves in such a way as if she had been brought up in a royal family (“As in a cote or in an oxe stalle, / But norischt in an emperour’s halle”).²⁶³ Her virtues give her a power that was not expected by Walter. She was assumed to convey the benefits of his

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 285.
²⁶¹ Ibid.
²⁶² Ibid.
²⁶³ Ibid., 286.
uncontrolled power, but a woman with a supposedly submissive behaviour acquires power through the people’s respect. But it is her agency, her desire and work that make her so powerful and famous; her personality attracts people’s attention, and they start to respect and love her (And couthe so the people’s hert embrace, / That ech hir loveth that lokith in hir face). From this point, she stops being a tool for men’s manipulations; rather, she starts to have more autonomy, even if it is still much hidden. Her subjectivity grows as she becomes more famous and noticeable. In this way, her passive submissiveness is ruptured as it is hard to imagine such a passive woman, who through her participation in public activities, gains recognition from the society.

Walter finally recognizes that, and is forced to admit that even people of the law estate have nobility. He says:

And for he saugh that under low degree
Was ofte vertu y-hid, the people him helde
A prudent man, and that is seyb ful seyde.

This stanza suggests that he is aware of Grizeld’s virtues, which create problems for him. If before the marriage everything was in his power, now it is not so obvious. The communes measure him on Grizeld’s scale. Through that alteration, she is not a man’s tool anymore, but a subject, an agent, who contributes to Walter’s power and holds her own power. It is her femininity, revealed through the rupture in her image that takes away his power, thereby dismissing his masculinity and threatening his masculine power. He has sought to control a submissive woman; however, this submissive wife creates exactly the same threat to his power as communed did. Femininity becomes power. Like London women of XIV century London,

264 Ibid.
265 Ibid., 287.
Grizeld takes initiative and cooperates with her husband in order to secure her position in the family.

As many women in medieval England, she transgresses marriage and the boundaries of the private sphere, intervening in the public sphere:

\[
\text{Nought oonly this, Grisildis thurgh hir witte}
\]
\[
\text{Couthe al the feet of wyfly homlynesse,}
\]
\[
\text{But eek whan that the tyme required it}
\]
\[
\text{The commune profit couthe she redresse:}
\]
\[
\text{Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse}
\]
\[
\text{In al that land that sche ne couthe appese,}
\]
\[
\text{And wisly bryng hem all in rest and ese.}
\]
\[
\text{Though that hir housbond absent were anoon,}
\]
\[
\text{If gentilmen, or other of hir contre}
\]
\[
\text{Were wroth, sche wolde brynge hem at oon,}
\]
\[
\text{So wyse and rype wordes hadde sche,}
\]
\[
\text{And juggement of so gret equite,}
\]
\[
\text{That she from heven sent was, as men wende,}
\]
\[
\text{People to save and every wrong to amende.\textsuperscript{266}}
\]

Her virtues give her the right to intervene within the male space by helping Walter to rule. This seems contradictory. She has to follow all of Walter’s orders and words, but she does not behave in this way.

Grizeld’s very femininity becomes her power and, therefore, creates a threat for Walter. If a woman can govern so easily, it threatens the legitimacy of Walter.\textsuperscript{267} This threat increases when

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{267} Ibid.
Grizeld gives birth to a child. Even if it is not a boy, people believe that Grizeld will give birth to a son soon ("For though a mayden child come al byfore, / Sche may unto a knave child atteigne, / By liklihed, sith sche nys not bareigne"). The situation becomes even more complicated for Walter. She is not an example of obedience for the commune, on the contrary, she is an example of taking power and performing his duties, even if under the marquis’s surveillance. One is to notice that in this case the focus is shifted to Grizeld, rather than remaining on Walter. I argue that Cox’s conclusion that Grizeld is a symbol of an ideal woman and wife is not consistent because, in fact, she transgresses the boundaries.

Walter must address the threat to his masculinity and political power. He warns her that people do not recognize her as a queen. In order to re-establish his power he reminds her about her promise to obey all of his orders ("That ye to me assent as in this thing. / Schwe now your paciens in your wirching / That thou me hightest and swor in yon village, / That day that maked was oure mariage"). When Walter’s servant comes to take away her daughter, she seems completely calm and patient. However, in her last words, when she claims sorrow about the situation ("I trowe that to a norice in this caas / It had ben hard this rewthe for to see"), her actual disagreement is revealed. Her submissiveness here is not passive as she speaks openly about her misfortune.

Her femininity is more important than her obedience to her husband, because her ability to give birth to a son leads to the stability of the state. Walter is afraid of her as a challenger of his power, because he uses his people’s discontent to explain his desire to take away the child. Walter understands that she feels that power, and he wants to show her that she does not have any

267 Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 191.
269 Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, 70.
power. People support her and they do not understand that cruelty. She becomes a person, a subject for them, and a person who has authority because of her personal characteristics. That is why Walter cannot stop. All his efforts to force her to obey, to show his communes how to behave properly, turn out to be another argument for Grizeld’s agency and subjectivity, and for the people’s concerns about her and Walter’s role in performing official duties.

This last act is a culmination of his power over her and upon his people. To some extent he wants her to surrender, to show her that she is weak, that she cannot be so strong. In that case he has the right to do what he wants. It will show the insufficient of femininity and exhalt his power. So, Grizeld’s surrender would mean that a woman does not have power to struggle with a man. He is the only one who has a right to be a subject. As Hansel shows, Walter sees her as a threat and tries to eliminate the threat. But it means that she is now the centre of the story; this story is not about Walter anymore, but about a woman who stands against a man. Thus, it means that Grizeld would always win as any of her action would speak better about her than about Walter. He stops torturing her because he realizes that she has won. Overall, it is her power that threatens Walter, which he recognizes. Eventually Grizeld wins because she remains strong against all the challenges.

In this story femininity becomes a power struggle against patriarchy. Grizeld is active in the sense that she stands against all of the obstables created by Walter. A woman is the true subject of the story, not men. Like those women in England who started to trade and participated in all activities performed earlier by men, she does the same. Grizeld shows an example of internal power and stands against the suppressive power of an authoritative man, who is ready to torture in order to suppress and dismiss a supposedly weak woman. But it is due to the ruptures in

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272 Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 191.
273 Ibid., 192.
274 Ibid., 191.
her representation that we can see her agency and autonomy. At the junction of submissiveness and activity, her subjectivity and independent will are seen. The narrator, with his woes, proves that Chaucer also recognized her agency. It is a very rare case, when Chaucer raises his own voice and expresses his own opinion so clearly, but in his envoy, Chaucer openly claims his woes about those women who had tragic destinies because of men’s behaviour. He stands against cruel husbands and defends women who suffer because of them. The tension between the rigid structure of language and the genuine involvement of women in the public space led to the appearance of Chaucer’s pro-women voice.

2.3. Virginia between faith and emergence of subjectivity

“The Physician’s Tale” tells us about a corrupted judge who wants to grab Virginius’ daughter Virginia. By using false testimony, he almost succeeds in taking her, but Virginius prefers to kill her, rather to allow her to lose her chastity. In this subchapter, I will show that ruptures in Virginia’s character are due to the emergence of her female subjectivity, which unfortunately lead to her death.

Virginia, whose the very name hints to the idea of chastity, seems to be depicted in a traditional way. She is completely submissive and follows her father’s order concerning her death. However, even in this narrative that was almost exclusively treated by scholars as a representation of the ideal woman’s behaviour, when she prefers to die rather than to be unchaste, such a reading must be confronted. As with the two previous characters, the consistency and coherence of those characters is not preserved. The language she, Virginia, is described through is still old, but Chaucer’s personal experience within the historical context, is confronted with that ideal image.
Her submissive character is not consistent. When the father says that she should die, rather than to be taken to the judge, she answers:

And sayde: «Goode fader, schal I dye?
Is ther no grace? Is ther no remedy?»

In this question, in the suspicion towards her father’s decision, I argue, one can find an inconsistency in the seemingly passive Virginia. This question indicates that she reflects upon her destiny and asks what the purpose of her death is. In other words, Virginia speculates about her subjective personality and about her life. Ultimately, she challenges Virginius’s authority in making decisions concerning her life, and, thus, she establishes herself as an active individual within her own life. The concern that she expresses reveals another angle of her personality. Asking her father about ways to escape death, she implies the notion about potential possibilities of alternatives for her death. Logically, it can be even the loss of her virginity, or some tricky behaviour in order to deceive the judge. So, the threat to lose virginity does not necessarily mean her inevitably death as a result.

It means, firstly, that the absolute value of virginity is not accepted by her, and she is considering different options. Secondly, she has an emerging subjectivity and independence from her father. The question about her destiny can even be seen as a humble effort to propose alternatives to the father. Like Constance with her seeming consent, as she proposed alternatives and expressed disagreement, Virginia does the same. In her subtle way, she offers alternatives, hoping that the father would consider it and find other ways to escape rape. Thus, her name “Virginia” clashes with her words and thoughts, as existing stereotypes do not fit the kind of active businesswomen Chaucer knew. Virginia comes across more as a cunning wife who looks

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for ways to perceive an authoritative male, rather than the example to follow. Her image as an ideal Christian holy woman, thus, loses its coherency.

At the same time this image is not consistent and is destroyed not only by her question, but also by the way how Virginia is depicted. In this section I want to show that in the creation of this image, Chaucer does not create a perfect and coherent image of an ideal submissive woman, thus the question she asks, logically, follows from her image. This is seen by the way in which her image is constructed. Nature could say that no one could create Virginia’s beauty, copy that creature, because she is so beautiful (“… Lo! I, Nature, / Thus can I forme and peynte a creature / Whan that me lust – who can me counterfete?”).\textsuperscript{276} Nature emphasizes that several times by saying that nobody can repeat her deed (“If they presumed me to cunterfete”). Then, when the narrator describes Virginia he also tells us that:

\begin{quote}
Hir facound eek ful womanly and playn,

Noon counterfeted termes hadde sche.\textsuperscript{277}
\end{quote}

The word “counterfeit” can hold the following meaning in Medieval English, defined by Michigan University: made to resemble something, false (about a person); spurious, not genuine (about a thing); counterfeit; pretended; deceptive, misshapen.\textsuperscript{278} It is simultaneously copy, false, and pretending. Through this logic, Virginia is a genuine copy.

But how can the one who is a copy be genuine? How can this authenticity be achieved in a copy, even if in a perfect one? This internal contradiction destroys the image of Virginia, as it is not coherent; she is seen as genuine copy, that is, something impossible to imagine. Can she be really honest? Or is this honesty nothing but false, because she is copy? Or she is a copy and she does not have her own mind and, therefore, she is sincere just because she does not have her own

\textsuperscript{276} Chaucer, \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, 2002, 454.
\textsuperscript{277} Ibid., 455.
\textsuperscript{278} http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec-med-idx?size=First+100&type=orths&q1=counterfe*&rgxp=constrained
will. In both ways she cannot be seen sustainable, thus, the whole image as such is put into question. If Virginia follows the original, it means she is sincere in the sense that she follows the pattern. But, if she deviates, she is false, she is not original and real, and thus, she cannot be sincere. It is not a coincidence that the narrator needs to discuss it several times; to indicate her nature and essence as a sincere copy as if he feels the tension and wants her to conform to the norms in order to maintain the coherence of the image.

But if she is a copy, who or what is an original of that copy? Where is the pattern from which she copies or from which deviates? By speaking about nurturing, the narrator gives a clear answer that Virginia should follow her father’s pattern. He says that parents should take care of their children, because children are educated by parents’ examples or by the lack of their attention (“Beth war that by ensample of youre lyvyng, / Outher by necgligence in chastisyng”),279 but under their governance (“Youre is the charge of al her suffraunce / Whiles thay be under your governaunce”).280 It is parents, and in this case it is the father who is an “ensample”, or the original. It is he, who she should copy and be his follower. By following good examples of her father, she becomes holy. The narrator again underlines her great virtues by mentioning her humbleness (“prudent an so bounteous”)281 and her appearance (“Bothe of hir beaute and boute wyde”).282 Thus, the narrator tries to present her as a good copy.

Cox sees in thee emphasis on shame the idea that women should be ashamed as women, because women are the concentration of desire, and that is why they are responsible for contending that desire. That is, to be ashamed of being woman means to satisfy patriarchal

280 Ibid.
281 Ibid., 457.
282 Ibid.
culture. But, as others argue, Virginius projects himself in her, because her chastity is his honour and masculinity. Thus, Virginia should follow and copy him completely. On the other hand, if she is a copy of an original, but a copy that behaves as an original, it means that her shame is fake in essence; that her shame is a projection of Virginius’s emotions. The appearance of that shame is another justification of her impossibility to follow it. She is a copy who is supposed to copy the masculine father in order to become a feminine daughter. But to follow him it means to become a man, to acquire his cruelty and masculinity, thus, to lose her feminine nature, to become a man in all senses.

The narrator understands this and cautions about a wolf in sheep’s clothing (“Under a sheperd softe and necligent / The wolf hath many a schep and lamb torent”). He knows that she is not a real, genuine, and proper copy, because she is not a man, she cannot be a man. Her masculinity is fake, just an illusion, therefore, she violates the order and represents something unusual in male society. Her question is an establishing of her feminine (meaning not male) subjectivity, in which she challenges the patriarchal order and the society. The very effort of the narrator to put her in order by sacrificing her life in order to save her chastity, leads to a violation of the whole system. Rather than die, she asks and shows her dislike by speaking. This inevitably leads to her death, because in such a society this is not acceptable. Thus, Cox concludes that Virginia must be killed as a danger towards the masculinity of her father. However, I argue that she must be killed because of her difference from the father. She could establish her subjectivity, to alienate herself from him, and thus she becomes a threat. Cox wants to see her as a continuation of the father, but I see her as a separate, autonomous subject.

285 Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, 60.
286 Ibid.
It is important to see that she was killed because of a false conviction. Again we see that the idea of the copy and the original is at stake. As it is unclear if she follows the original or she is fake, the danger rises from the false accusation. It is the problem of her becoming a human being, which makes the narrator opt for killing her. The whole scene of her ostensible agreement can be seen as a fake. Thus, we have her question and her consent to kill her. That is why Blamires speaks about contradictions as they are inherent in the story and create inconsistency.

Virginia represents the distortion of the entire image of women, who should follow men. She is supposed to be a genuine copy of her father in order to become a proper woman. However, this internal contradiction cannot be solved, as paradoxically Virginia has to become a woman by masculinization. But by this process, the very existence of Virginia is a threat to Virginius’ masculinity. In this distorted image Virginia’s subjectivity and agency emerge. As non-genuine copy, she becomes a women, a human being significantly different from males. This is also a threat for patriarchal society. Thus, Virginia must be assassinated in order to maintain social stability.

In this chapter I explored three “submissive” characters from *Canterbury Tales*. I aimed to show that Constance, Grizeld, and Virginia are only seemingly passive. In fact, their behaviour and speech diverge from their supposed passiveness. Constance uses subtle ways to change her disastrous conditions; she is actively involved in each event that happened in her story. She also expresses complaints and worries about her destiny and implies an understanding of a better life. Rather than being subjected to the will of men, she performs a non-passive attitude to her life. Thus, her image as an object is ruptured. Grizeld, throughout the Tale, evolves from a voiceless object to a feminine subject. Using her position as the wife of ruler, she manages to gain popularity and gain power. It is because of that that Walter challenges her love. Grizeld is a threat to his power and masculinity, therefore, he desires to oppress her. But this very action indicates
that he recognizes her agency and subjectivity, thus, her autonomy. Virginia contains an internal threat to masculine domination because her feminine otherness challenges patriarchy. Men want to make her a "proper" woman by imitating masculine behaviour, but this leads to the creation of non-feminine subject. On the other hand, her own demand to participate in making a decision about her life shows that she realizes her femininity and non-masculinity and wants to be considered. In this light, her holiness is torn apart, because she considers different options in order to save her own life.

Overall, these three women show that their submissiveness is not passive. They are forced to be submissive, but try to find ways to control and change their lives. The way in which they do that is due to their oppressed positions in the society. That is why it is not an open resistance, but a hidden and subtle activity masked by submissiveness.
Conclusion

Despite obvious achievements and progressive ideas, “second wave” feminism has nowadays been reconsidered by a new generation of scholars. They noticed that victimization of women and other oppressed groups, does not always help to improve the position of these women and eliminate discrimination. On the contrary, it may reinforce the suppression of marginalized groups. Thus, scholars have started to investigate new possibilities for oppressed groups to express their subjective agencies. In this sense, history provides numerous examples of resistance to patriarchy.

In her book “Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity”, Sedgwick-Kosofsky proposes to stop looking at oppression and to start thinking about how we can deal with it. According to her, it is more fruitful to move further from the simple statement that oppression exists. This way of looking at the problem, she calls “reparative” reading and she sees it as an alternative to the “paranoid” one.287

I think that some gender scholars, while admitting and recognizing the structure of oppression of women in patriarchal society, might start “reparative” reading in gender studies. Research that aims to look for ways of how women actually could speak and resist patriarchy allows us to understand and establish ways to resist in current societies. Moreover, such a scholarship gives an optimistic view at history of oppressed groups who, within the strict and rigid societal structures, still could find ways to express themselves.

In that sense Medieval society, which is always seen as extremely patriarchal, where women’s voices are completely absent, can be reconsidered in such a way that shows that even in that society, women could find ways to expresses themselves and establish their autonomy. To

understand the ways that they were able to do so means to look at the broader context, beyond literary criticism. Literary scholars emphasize that Constance, Grizeld, and Virginia are passive images of holy women, who must obey all male order and thus maintain patriarchy. They seem to miss some patterns of their speech and behavior that indicate an unusual pattern of submissiveness. Their desire to influence, to improve their life, and their open claims regarding their concerns, I call non-passive submissiveness. They are still subjected to the men, because the very structure of the patriarchal society does not allow them to openly resist, but their speech and actions aim to change their lives and influence males’ decisions indirectly. This way of speaking up creates their agency and autonomy through the ruptures and distortions of their supposedly “passive” images.

In order to recognize those ruptures and reveal females’ agential patterns, I have looked at the historical reality and biography of the creator of Canterbury Tales, namely G. Chaucer. I outlined that even if women were treated badly by the official Catholic Church, in reality they did have some legal and economic advantages. In the legal sphere, women had almost the same inheritance rights as men, they could inherit property and used it. Moreover, English and London laws allowed women to perform all sorts of economic activities as men did. They could be legal equal partners of their husband in mutual business as well as they could run their own business independent from the husband.

These legal rights helped them to easily start their own economic activities in English society. The special marriage pattern, when women did social work and gained experience, secured their status as more independent spouses, who were experienced enough not to allow men to exercise power without any considerations. All these factors led to the emergence of business women, who not only were equal partners in family businesses, but also often ran their own ones independently. This active involvement in economic life meant that women were seen in the
public sphere. Their relatively high visibility and presence in the society influenced Chaucer’s writing. It is even more noticeable when one looks at the poet’s biography. Chaucer was born in to a merchant family in London and during his life he participated in a wide range of activities. Thus, he could not miss the visible and active business women, who were especially prominent in London. Chaucer reflected upon his encountering with real women in his poetry.

In the last part of my work, I analyzed “The Man of Law’s Tale”, “The Clerk’s Tale”, and “The Physician’s Tale” in order to find women’s agency and autonomy through ruptured images. I found that. Constance, the main heroine of “The Man of Law’s Tale”, throughout the story expresses complaints, actively participated in her life in order to change it, and remember her husband of suffering she had. Such a behavior distorts the ideal image of the suffering holy woman who follows men. On the contrary, she perceives herself as a subject and tries to achieve her goals in intelligent ways.

In The Clerk’s Tale” Grizeld shows the evolution of her feminine autonomy and agency. At the beginning, she is a tool of men’s games, they use her to realize their own aims. However, throughout the story Grizeld is able to gain respect and popularity in such a way that she endangers her husband’s authority and masculinity. Thus, the very suffering Walter creates for her is a sign of her power and agential subjectivity. From starting as a silent object, Grizeld finishes as a female with her feminine power recognized by male patriarchal society.

“The Physician’s Tale” reveals a similar kind of feminine agent, who challenges male authority by asking for ways to save her life even if it means to lose her chastity. Through this action, she destroys an image of Saint Virginia, who is ready to die for religious ideals. Moreover, in this story, she emerges as a non-masculine, feminine subject with her own significant features. This otherness is immediately recognized by patriarchal society, which needs
to force to confront the order. Thus, her death is inevitable, because it is a way to maintain masculine domination.
Bibliography


