

CHAUCER'S WOMEN

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SEP 12 1933

Presented to the Department of English of Washington
and Lee University, in partial fulfillment of the re-
quirements of the degree of Master of Arts. May, 1933.

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PREFACE

The subject for this investigation was suggested by Professor E. F. Shannon, and I wish to express my thanks to him for this, and also for his kindly, helpful advisement and his many helpful suggestions throughout the preparation of this paper.

S. F. B.

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CHAUCER'S WOMEN

I

CHAUCER'S WOMEN

Chaucer has given us an array of femininity unsurpassed by any other poet. From every walk in life he drew his heroines and in every conceivable color he painted them. From Alison, the deliberately unfaithful, sensual, mercenary wife of the "Miller's Tale," through Criseyde of doubtful virtues in his "Troilus and Criseyde," to Constance, the perfect creation of the "Tale of the Man of Law," Chaucer takes us with a skill and a consummate art lacking in any other English poet. A comprehensive study of all of Chaucer's heroines would be an endless task, and yet how can we say that one of them is more deserving of our attention than another? No one of them is without merit, and those who would prove interesting to some might prove less so to others. Unfaithful, youthful May,¹ obedient Virginia,² faithful Prudence,³ the

1 "The Marchantes Tale."

2 "The Phisiciens Tale."

3 "Tale of Melibeus."

unnamed, vulgar, Miller's Wife,¹ and even domestic Per-
telote,² Chauntecleer's faithful spouse, are all worthy
of our most careful attention, for in each of them we
see Chaucer's skill as a literary artist. There are five,
however, that are generally conceded to display best
Chaucer's ability to portray character, and it is to
these that I shall confine myself here.

Criseyde was chosen because she is the heroine of
the "Troilus and Criseyde" which Professor Root so aptly
terms Chaucer's "only work of large dimensions, requiring
a sustained effort of the poetical imagination," which he
brought to completion.³ Although he does not mention Bo-
ccaccio by name, Chaucer's principle source was undoubtedly
Boccaccio's "Filostrato."⁴⁻⁵ The entire story is one of
dramatic, emotional characterization, rather than action,
and for this reason is particularly interesting to us.

1 "Reves Tale."

2 "Nonne Preestes Tale."

3 R. K. Root: "The Poetry of Chaucer," p. 87.

4 For Chaucer's failure to mention Boccaccio by name see:
E. F. Shannon: "Chaucer and the Roman Poets," p. 157, Note.

5 For other works influencing Chaucer in forming his con-
ception of the character of Criseyde see: E. F. Shannon:
"Chaucer and the Roman Poets," pp. 157-168.

Emily is our best illustration of Chaucer's ability to portray character by suggestion. Here again Chaucer drew from Boccaccio, this time from his "Teseide."

For the original of Constance, Chaucer went to the "Anglo-Norman Chronicle" by Nicholas Trivet. Through her we see what Chaucer was capable of, in portraying that most difficult type - the perfect, passive woman.

According to Chaucer, Petrarch furnished the original of Griselda, but we know that Petrarch made his translation from the tenth story of the tenth day of Boccaccio's "Decameron," and it is to this that we go for the original of this patient lady. Here, Chaucer uses both suggestion and action to give us character; and to these two he adds self-revelation and produces his great, original creation, Alice, the Wife of Bath.

It is notable that Chaucer has modernized each of these characters so that they would prove more understandable and consequently more interesting to his mediaeval readers. In doing this he violated certain conventionalities, such as the use of mediaeval titles of nobility instead of the

older ones, but I think we can say with assurance that this in no way detracted from his stories and certainly gave them greater appeal from the viewpoint of his readers.¹

There is one other thing worthy of note here - the various attitudes toward love displayed through these characters. In Criseyde, through the very fact that we are made aware that she is breaking its conventions, we are given an excellent view of love as it was conceived by the Court of Love in the middle ages. In Emily, we have that view of love which was rapidly passing away, the love of the age of Chivalry. In Constance and in Griselda, we have similar views, with the added attraction that Griselda is a woman of the people although she is the wife of a king. In the Wife of Bath, we have a frank expression of the sensual, animal passion which constituted love in the conception of a woman of the lower classes. With such variety as this added to Chaucer's great skill as a narrative poet, a study of any or all of his characters could not be other than delightful.

¹ In the "Knight's Tale," Theseus is spoken of as the Duke of Athens. Ll. 860-861.

CRISEYDE

CRISEYDE

Professor Root begins his discussion of the Criseyde of Chaucer by stating that she presents somewhat the same puzzle as does the Mona Lisa of Da Vinci with her "unfathomable smile of tender sweetness or of cunning cruelty."¹ I agree with this statement without reservation, for in spite of his almost irrefutable proof that Chaucer has not ennobled the character of Boccaccio's heroine, and that she is "the same lightly-loving lady, careful of her reputation, but careless of her honor," it is as difficult for me to accept Professor Root's verdict that, figuratively speaking, Criseyde's smile is that of "cunning cruelty," as it was for him to accept the decision of Ten Brink that her smile is that of "tender sweetness."² Professor Root states that one looks in vain for the innocence and inexperience postulated by Ten Brink, and cites as one of his first and, as I interpret it, what he considers one of his most

1 R. K. Root: "The Poetry of Chaucer," p. 105.

2 R. K. Root: "The Poetry of Chaucer," pp. 105 and 114.

convincing proofs of Criseyde's cunning, her own statement:-

"It nedeth me ful sleyly for to pley." ¹

He states that this line sums up the lady's character completely. ² It is undoubtedly evidence of her cunning and of her experience, for Criseyde is not an ignorant, stupid, virginal creature. But is it evidence of a cunning born of a knowledge of the arts of love? I think that its application is more limited than Professor Root would have us believe. Pandarus has appealed to Criseyde's sympathy to such an extent that she believes that he and Troilus will take their lives if she refuses to grant Troilus her friendship. What is the result?

"Criseyde, which that wel neigh starf for fere,
 So as she was the ferfulleste wight
 That mighte be, and herde eek with hir ere,
 And saw the sorwful ernest of the knight,
 And in his preyere eek saw noon unright,
 And for the harm that mighte eek fallen more,
 She gan to rewe, and to dradde hir wonder sore;

¹ "Troilus and Criseyde," l. 463. Book II.

And thoughte thus, 'unhappes fallen thikke
 Alday for love, and in swich maner cas,
 As men ben cruel in hem-self and wikke;
 And if this man slee here him-self, allas!
 In my presence, it wol be no solas.
 What men wolde of hit deme I can nat seye;
It nedeth me ful sleyly for to pleye.'

And with a sorwful syk she seyde thrye,
 'Al lord! what me is tid a sory chaunce!
 For myn estat now lyth in jupartye,
And eek myn emes lyf lyth in balaunce;
 But nathelees, with goddes governaunce,
I shal so doon, myn honour shal I kepe,
And eek his lyf;' and stinte for to wepe.

'Of harmes two, the lesse is for to chese;
Yet have I lever maken him good chere
In honour, than myn emes lyf to lese;
 Ye seyn, ye no-thing elles me requere?'
 'No, wis,' quod he, 'myn owne nece dere.'
 'Now wel,' quod she, 'and I wol doon my peyne;
 I shal myn herte ayeins my lust constreyne,

But that I nil not holden him in honde,
 Ne love a man, ne can I not, ne may
 Ayeins my wil; but elles wol I fonde,
 Myn honour sauf, plesse him fro day to day;
 Ther-to nolde I nought ones have seyde nay,
 But that I dredde, as in my fantasye;
 But cesse cause, ay cesseth maladye.

And here I make a protestacioun,
 That in this proces if ye depper go,
 That certaynly, for no savacioun
 Of yow, though that ye sterve bothe two,
 Though al the world on o day be my fo,
 Ne shal I never on him han other routhe.'-

'I graunte wel,' quod Pandare, 'by my trouthe.'" 1

In the light of the circumstances surrounding
 its utterance, is this statement by Criseyde to be con-
 strued as an indication that she possesses the wiles of
 the courtesan, or that she even remotely contemplates

1 "Troilus and Criseyde," Ll. 449-490. Book II.

any wrong doing? Can it not be construed as readily as an indication of her innocence, her modesty, and her tender sympathy, all of which instinctively urge her to avoid such a catastrophe if she can do it in an honorable way? I shall not further attempt to refute Professor Root's arguments for his view of Criseyde's character. This one argument is advanced merely to show how subtle is Chaucer's characterization of this fair lady, and how difficult, even impossible, it is to reach a definite conclusion as to what Chaucer intended to make of Boccaccio's heroine.

I know of no better way to set forth what Chaucer has done with Criseyde than to state in full the widely divergent conclusions of Ten Brink, R. K. Root, and N. D. Griffin and A. B. Myrick.

"The English Criseyde is more innocent, less experienced, less sensual, more modest than her Italian prototype. What a multitude of agencies were needed to inflame her love for Troilus; what a concatenation of circumstances, what a display of trickery and intrigue, to bring her at last

to his arms! We see the thread of the web in which she is entangled drawing ever closer around her; her fall appears to us excusable, indeed unavoidable. And if afterwards, after the separation, she does not resist the temptation of Diomedes - how is she accountable, if her mind is less true and deep than that of Troilus? how is she accountable, when that first fall robbed her of her moral stay?" ¹

"There is but one conclusion to be drawn from all this. Chaucer has not really, as the critics tell us, ennobled the character of Boccaccio's heroine. She is the same lightly-loving lady, careful of her reputation, but careless of her honor. She is merely a little more clever in deceiving her friends. It is Pandarus that Chaucer has changed and developed. With a positive genius for intrigue, and a mistaken belief in his niece's virtue or prudence, he devises an elaborate scheme to bring

¹ Ten Brink: "History of English Literature," (Eng. trans.), 2. 92. in R. K. Root's "Poetry of Chaucer," p. 105.

about a series of meetings which she desires as strongly as either Troilus or Pandarus. She has no objection to playing the role of betrayed innocence; and with just sufficient reluctance before the act, and reproach after it is accomplished (cf. 3. 1564-1570), to carry out the illusion, she walks with a hidden smile into the trap set by Pandarus with such needless craft. It is Pandarus, and not Criseyde, who is the dupe - an effect which adds immensely to the comedy of his character.

If so much be granted, Criseyde's actions in the two remaining books offer no serious difficulties in interpretation. Though light of love, she is far from being heartless; and her grief at leaving Troy and Troilus to rejoin her father in the Grecian camp is entirely sincere. She is really very fond of Troilus; for who can help liking the brave, handsome, free-spirited boy? Nor does she at all object to his idealization of her, untrue though she knows it to be.

In that wonderfully wrought scene in which the Trojan ladies come to bid her farewell and torture her by their polite prattle, she really suffers, and we are right in pitying her. But that her heart is not really breaking, that her love for Troilus is not the love of a Juliet for Romeo, is shown by her refusal to assent to any of Troilus's plans for averting the separation, and her practical acquiescence in the royal decree.

When she rides away from Troy, I think she really means to keep her pledge to Troilus and return on the tenth day; but she had not reckoned with the personality of Diomedes. He is no dreamy, idealizing boy, but a thorough man of the world. He does not lose his heart; he merely improves a good opportunity to win a lady's heart. All the greater will be his conquest if, as he suspects, she has a love in Troy. He needs no intriguing Pandarus, no long delay of courtship. He spends no sleepless nights. Instantly he sets to work, and before the Grecian camp is reached, he has made an impression. That in the heart of a woman like Criseyde the absent Troilus should fade before so compelling a personality as that of Diomedes is inevitable. Her poten-

tially sensual nature has inevitably deteriorated in her relations with Troilus, so that to Diomedes she falls a willing prey. Still she clings half-heartedly to Troilus; she has not ceased to care for him. Eventually, she thinks, I may keep my promise and return. Her letter holding out a false hope is not necessarily a wilful lie. But Criseyde's damnation is complete.

If this interpretation of Criseyde is correct, proof of Chaucer's consummate skill will be found in the way in which he has conveyed a superficial impression that his heroine is a virtuous woman seduced by treachery, and has then in the sequel shocked and surprised us by her ready yielding to Diomedes, all the while giving in his narrative the true interpretation of her character, which shall resolve all seeming inconsistency. One is tempted to ask, however, whether this artistic duplicity is not too successful in its attempt to mislead, and whether in consequence Criseyde has not proved to many readers a hopeless enigma."¹

¹ R. K. Root: "The Poetry of Chaucer," pp. 113-115.

"In his portrayal of Criseyde the English poet holds fast to the traditional conception of her instability and changeableness as emphasized by Benoit and retained by Boccaccio. But this underlying traditional conception, he, like Boccaccio before him, modifies in a manner peculiarly his own. Moland and D'Héricault distinguish the nicer differences between the French, the Italian, and the English heroines by remarking that in Benoit's hands Cressida is 'a slave girl,' in the hands of Boccaccio she becomes 'a courtesan,' and in the hands of Chaucer somewhat of 'a lady,' though still with 'traces of her ancestors in her veins.' The distinction thus strikingly phrased possesses a large measure of truth. True to the hardy standards of an age still largely heroic Benoit conceived of Briseida as a pure child of the senses, without moral responsibility, to be bandied about as a mere chattel from warrior to warrior in Homeric fashion. Boccaccio, in accordance with the more luxurious and less virile

tastes of his own day, transforms the French heroine into the type of the sophisticated Neapolitan lady of pleasure. His Criseida is in no sense unconscious of the moral issue; she deliberately cherishes indulgent theories and sins with her eyes open; she is not seduced but seduces herself. Finally Chaucer, while forced to admit the damaging evidence of his authorities, does so with reluctance; he would spare Criseyde if he could.¹ As we have seen, he does what he can to make her appear more sinned against than sinning."²

Beyond this point there is little to be said. It seems that Chaucer has quite deliberately left us in doubt as to his own opinion of Criseyde, apparently preferring to let his readers choose for themselves the interpretation that is to be placed upon her character. He has as Professor Root says, transformed the spirit of the story from pathetic sentimentality to half-ironical humor, and this same thing may be said of his depiction of Criseyde's

1 "Troilus, V, 1093-1099.

2 Griffin and Myrick: "The Filostrato of Giovanni Boccaccio," pp. 105-106.

character.

There is one other difference worthy of note. Chaucer is not a sensualist and as far as the translation of his "auctor" would permit, he has placed no emphasis on this side of Criseyde's nature. Likewise, we must bear in mind also, in making an estimate of Criseyde's character, that, according to the Court of Love idea, Criseyde did not sin in her relationship with Troilus. It was perfectly legitimate for a woman to have a lover and to grant her favors to him freely. Her crime was merely that of deserting him. We must judge her by the fourteenth century standards of the Court of Love and not by the twentieth century standards of morality. For these reasons I am inclined to the view that the apparent ennobling of Criseyde's character, which many of the critics feel, is due solely to Chaucer's reluctance to let sensuality become the dominant note in his heroine's character, and not, as Griffin and Myrick say, to the fact that he has deliberately done what he can to make her appear more sinned against than sinning. On the other hand, for the additional reason that Chaucer failed to place any emphasis on Criseyde's desertion of Troilus, I am equally as reluctant to

accept Professor Root's conclusion that Criseyde's smile is that of "cunning cruelty."

What, then, did Chaucer intend to make of Criseyde? I think there are possible as many views of her character as there are thoughtful readers of his poem.

EMILY

EMILY

Probably the most difficult of Chaucer's characters to analyse is Emily in the "Knight's Tale." Emily is not an original creation of Chaucer, but is drawn from the character of the same name in Boccaccio's "Teseide," and it is to this story that Chaucer is indebted for the entire outline of the "Knight's Tale." This story is not, as was his "Troilus and Criseyde," one of characterization, but is fundamentally one of description, and it is due to this that we encounter such difficulty in determining Emily's character. She performs no act that is in any way indicative of her character, and only once in the course of the story does she speak - in her prayer to Diana. Chaucer's characterization of Emily is entirely by suggestion, through her effect upon Palamon, Arcite, and Theseus.

The following criticism and synopsis of Boccaccio's "Teseide," prepared by Professor Root, will furnish an excellent background for an examination of the character of Emily.

"Comparing Chaucer's version of the story with that of Boccaccio, the most striking fact is their disparity in length. Exclusive of the rimed argomenti which precede each of the twelve books, the "Teseide" comprises 9896 lines, or 1237 stanzas of ottava rima, while the "Knight's Tale" contains but 2250 lines - little more than a fifth the bulk of its original. Besides this ruthless use of the pruning-knife, one notices the abandonment by Chaucer of the division into twelve books, and with it the conventional invocations of the Muses, of much of the mythological machinery, and, in short, of all the conventional ear-marks of the Virgilian epic. But more significant than these external changes are the modifications and omissions which Chaucer has made in the story itself. These can be best shown by giving a brief synopsis of Boccaccio's poem as it unfolds itself book by book.

Book I narrates in 1104 lines what Chaucer summarizes in a dozen:-

'How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus, and by his chivalrye.'

Book II devotes 792 lines to the home-coming of Theseus, and to his expedition against Thebes, which results in the capture of Palemone and Arcita, and their condemnation to lifelong imprisonment. In the third book the real action of the story begins. After a year of imprisonment, the two kinsmen catch fatal sight of Emilia as she walks in her garden, but with Boccaccio it is Arcita who sees her first, not Palemone; while the Emilia of the Italian is not, like Chaucer's Emily, so wholly unconscious that she has won the attention of the Theban captives. As Arcita, after his release, rides away from Athens, Emilia stands on a balcony and receives his impassioned farewell.

The whole of Book IV is devoted to Arcita, his love-longing in exile, his return to Theseus's court under the assumed name of Pentec. The sorrows of the lovelorn knight, which Chaucer passes over half humorously, are detailed by Boccaccio with all his native sentiment. Very characteristic is stanza 32, in which Arcita, who has come in his wanderings to AEGina,

stands on the seashore all alone, and is comforted by the breeze which blows from Athens, the breeze which has been very near to Emilia. Book V, which brings the action up to the point of Theseus's intervention and the ordaining of the tournament, differs only slightly from Chaucer's story, save that the escape of Palemone is narrated in detail. In the following book the two kinsmen collect their champions; but instead of the two vivid descriptions of Emetrius and Lygurge, Boccaccio devotes four hundred lines to a catalogue of the heroes who take part on the two sides. Book VII is given up to the prayers of Arcita, Palemone, and Emilia, and to the description of the amphitheatre. In the description of the tournament, which fills Book VIII, Chaucer's superiority to his original is again evident. Instead of his brief but vigorous picture of the mêlée, the Italian furnishes a series of single combats between the champions of the two sides, warriors in whom the reader has no direct interest whatever. Meanwhile Emilia looks on, and feels her love go out now to the

one kinsman, now to the other, according as the fortunes of the battle sway now this way, now that. In Book IX the victor Arcita is hurt to death through the device of Venus and her hell-sent fury. In place of the brief, deeply pathetic speech in which Chaucer's Arcite takes leave of friend and loved one, Boccaccio, in Book X, draws a long death-bed scene, less effective because of its greater length. The 728 verses of Book XI are devoted to the funeral of Arcita, which is celebrated with elaborate games after Virgilian model. In the closing book, after an interval of only a few weeks, is solemnized the wedding of Palemone and Emilia.

The "Teseide" is by no means a contemptible composition; but, considering the slightness of its plot, it is much too long. Nor is the essentially romantic, sentimental character of the tale in keeping with its elaborate epic machinery. In his great condensation, in his simplification, in all his changes of detail, Chaucer's superior literary discernment is plainly evident. What Chaucer has

borrowed is the outline of the tale; the execution is mainly his own..."

At the outset Chaucer convinces us of Emily's exceptional beauty.

"That Emelye, that fairer was to sene
 Than is the lillie upon his stalke grene,
 And fressher than the May with floures newe -
 For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe,
 I noot which was the fairer of hem two -" ¹

Chaucer further amplifies this, and indicates what his treatment of Emily is to be, through Palamon's lips when he first saw her from the tower.

"The fairnesse of that lady that I see
 Yond in the garden romen to and fro,
 Is cause of al my crying and my wo.

¹ "The Knight's Tale," Ll. 1035-1039.

I noot wher she be womman or goddesse;
 But Venus is it, soothly, as I gesse." 1

The effect upon Arcite is even more pronounced when he sees Emily, and we are left with no other course than to believe that her beauty is unsurpassable.

It is not, however, until Theseus and the ladies come upon Palamon and Arcite fighting, after their escape from prison, that we are given any clue to Emily's character.

"The quene anon, for verray wommanhede,
 Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,
 And alle the ladies in the companye." 2

It is true that Emily has caused this strife between Palamon and Arcite but her beauty alone was sufficient to do this, and even in this bit of characterization Chaucer generalizes so pointedly, "for verray wommanhede," that we do not feel that we are better acquainted with her.

1 "Knight's Tale," Ll. 1098-1102

2 "Knight's Tale," Ll. 1748-1750

What is the import of the following passage? Was Emily so fine and intelligent that Theseus respected her judgement and granted her request to forgive Palamon and Arcite, or was he merely following his own inclination and considering his own and his kingdom's welfare? I am rather inclined to the latter view.

"And therefore, sin I knowe of loves peyne,
 And woot how sore it can a man distreyne,
 As he that hath ben caught ofte in his las,
 I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespas,
 At requeste of the quene that kneleth here,
And eek of Emelye, my suster dere.

And ye shul bothe anon un-to me swere,
 That never-mo ye shul my contree dere,
 Ne make werre up-on me night ne day,
 But been my freendes in al that ye may;
 I yow foryeve this trespas every del.'" ¹

¹ "Knight's Tale," Ll. 1815-1825.

It is not until we hear Emily herself speak that we obtain one single definite clue to her real nature. Her prayer to Diana sums up so clearly all of the vague suggestions that have caused such violent reactions in Palamon and Arcite, that it is quoted here in full.

This grace I praye thee with-outt more,

"O chaste goddesse of the wodes grene,
 To whom bothe heven and erthe and see is sene,
 Quene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe,
 Goddesse of maydens, that myn herte hast knowe
 Ful many a yeer, and woost what I desire,
 As keep me fro thy vengeaunce and thyn ire,
 That Attheon aboughte cruelly.
 Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
 Desire to been a mayden al my lyf,
 Ne never wol I be no love ne wyf.
 I am, thou woost, yet of thy companye,
 A mayde, and love hunting and venerye,
 And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
 And noight to been a wyf, and be with childe.

Noght wol I knowe companye of man.
 Now help me, lady, sith ye may and can,
 For the thre formes that thou hast in thee.
 And Palamon, that hath swich love to me,
 And eek Arcite, that loveth me so sore,
 This grace I preye thee with-oute more,
 And sende love and pees bitwixe hem two;
 And fro me turne away hir hertes so,
 That al hir hote love, and hir desyr,
 And al hir bisy torment, and hir fyr
 Be queynt, or turned in another place;
 And if so be thou wolt not do me grace,
 Or if my destinee be shapen so,
 That I shal nedes have oon of hem two,
 As sende me him that most desireth me.
 Bihold, goddesse of clene chastitee,
 The bittre teres that on my chekes falle.
 Sin thou are mayde, and keper of us alle,
 My maydenhede thou kepe and wel conserve,
 And whyl I live a mayde, I wol thee serve."¹

¹ "Knight's Tale," Ll. 2297-2330.

In spite of this pointed recital by Emily herself, I think that we may well say in the words of Professor Root:

"We see her beauty and recognize her worth, realizing that the love of her may well be strong enough to break the friendship of a life; and yet we know her not at all."¹

But can we criticize Chaucer for leaving us so slightly acquainted with her? Is she not the typical heroine of the romances, ornamental and inspirational, and is this not the type of story which he is writing? Homer did the same thing with Helen, and who can say that he was not successful? It seems to me that Chaucer did all that he intended to with Emily, and intentionally left her as she is.

¹ R. K. Root: "The Poetry of Chaucer," p. 171.

CONSTANCE

CONSTANCE

In Dame Constance of the "Tale of the Man of Lawe," we have perhaps our best illustration of Chaucer's skill in characterization. In attempting to portray this perfect woman, Chaucer has undertaken what few other writers before him had dared, and in succeeding in his portrayal, he has accomplished what no others, before or after him, have accomplished. He has succeeded in giving us in Dame Constance, through her role as the calumniated wife and the symbol of perfection, not only these types, but also a character as clear and as individual, though perhaps not as entertaining and compelling, as the greatest of all his creations, the Wife of Bath. Milton tried, and failed, in a similar attempt in "Paradise Lost." The very perfection of the nature of God was too great for Milton's capabilities, and not only was he unable to give us more than a mystical, symbolic representation of God, but also he was unable to prevent the devil, because of his imperfect nature, from assuming the leading role in his poem. The devil remains for us a

creature of flesh and blood, an individual, as real and as convincing as our next-door neighbor.

Wherein lay Chaucer's ability to succeed where others failed? To answer this question we must go to the principal, immediate source of Chaucer's story, the "Anglo-Norman Chronicle" of Nicholas Trivet, and see what he had to work with in drawing his picture of Constance. In substance, Chaucer has followed Trivet's story faithfully, and for this reason the following summary by Professor French, of Trivet's story of "la pucele Constance," will suffice for the version of both authors.

"The Emperor Tiberius Constantinus had a daughter, named Constance, whom he caused to be instructed in the Christian faith and in the seven sciences. In her thirteenth year, she converted certain heathen merchants out of the great Saracen land, who had come to Rome, bearing rich merchandise. On their return to their own country, they were accused to the high Sultan concerning their conversion. Brought before him, they defended their faith and spoke in praise of the maid Constance, who had converted them. The Sultan, smit-

ten with love through their words, sent the merchants back to Rome, with rich gifts, to ask Constance in marriage. Tiberius gave his consent, on condition that the Sultan become a Christian and receive baptism. The Sultan accepted the conditions, gave hostages for the security of Constance, and ceded Jerusalem to the Christians. Thereupon, amid the grief of the whole city of Rome, Constance was sent from her father's house among strange barbarians.

The Sultan's mother, who saw her religion menaced, plotted evil and treason, entering into secret covenant with two hundred Saracens, who swore to support her in her quarrel. Feigning to become a Christian, she arranged with her son that she should hold a feast before the wedding. In the midst of the feast, the two hundred Saracens fell upon the guests and killed them all, male and female, save only Constance, and three young men, who bore the tidings to Rome.

Thus Constance remained alone, in the

hands of her enemies. As no promises and no threats could make her deny her faith, the Sultanness planned a new torment for her. She caused a ship to be stored with victuals, sufficient to sustain the life of the maiden for three years; and when Constance had been placed therein, the boat was taken out to the high seas and turned adrift, without sail or oar.

But God, who steered the ship of Noah, sent a favorable wind, which drove the ship ashore in Northumberland, near a castle, on Christmas Eve, in the eighth month of the fourth year. Elda, warden of the castle, came down to Constance and asked her of her condition. Speaking to him in his native tongue, she made such answers as satisfied him, though she did not tell him who she was; and he received her into the castle. Hermingild, his wife, perceiving her noble and virtuous life, was much smitten with love of her and was converted to

Christianity through her teaching.

One day, a blind Briton met Hermengild and Constance, as they walked beside the sea, and besought Hermingild to make the sign of the cross upon his eyes. Encouraged by Constance, she complied with his entreaty, and he was immediately enlightened and saw well and clearly. This miracle led to the conversion of Elda, and the man whose sight had been restored was sent into Wales, to fetch a bishop to baptize the household, to the number of four score and eleven. Shortly after, Elda went to his lord, King Alle, and told him of Constance; whereupon the king was very desirous of seeing her.

During Elda's absence, a Saxon knight, whom he had left in charge of the castle, tempted Constance to sin. Repulsed for the third time, he sought revenge. At daybreak, when Hermingild and Constance were soundly asleep, he cut the throat of Hermingild, his lady, as she lay beside Constance, sleeping in the same bed; and when he

had accomplished the crime, he hid the bloody knife behind Constance's pillow. So the wretch endeavored to lay the crime upon Constance; and although Elda defended her, he swore upon the Gospel that she was the murderess. Hardly had he spoken when a closed hand, like a man's fist, appeared before Elda and all who were present, and smote such a blow on the nape of the fellow's neck, that both his eyes flew out of his head, and the teeth out of his mouth, and he fell smitten to the earth. And thereupon, a voice said in the hearing of all, 'Against the daughter of Mother Church thou wast laying a scandal; this hast thou done, and I have held my peace.'

Some days later, King Alle arrived at the castle and passed sentence of death on the fellow. Taken with love for the maid Constance, the king accepted baptism and married her. Then, after half a year, news came to Alle that the Scots had warred upon his lands, and he gathered his host and took his departure for Scotland, giving his

wife in ward to Elda, constable of the castle, and to Lucius, Bishop of Bangor. Now Domild, the king's mother, had great disdain that her son had forsaken his religion for the love of a strange woman, whose lineage he did not know. When God and nature would, Constance was delivered of a male child, a beautiful child and great, and at his baptism he was named Maurice. Elda and Lucius sent word to the king, but their messenger went by way of Knaresborough, where Domild lived, that he might tell her the news. She feigned very great joy in the sight of the people; but that night, she made the messenger so drunk with an evil drink that he lay as if insensible and as a dead man. Then she opened the messenger's box and substituted counterfeit letters, in which Constance was declared to be an evil spirit, and the son born of her body to be a monster, hideous and doleful. On the morrow, the messenger went his way, being charged to return by the same road.

When the messenger was come to the king, he told him the true and joyful news; but the counterfeit letters gave his tidings the lie, and the king bade him say no more of his wife or of the child. In his reply to the letters of Earl Elda and Bishop Lucius, the king bade them keep his wife safely till his return. The messenger, returning to Domild, was again made drunk, and once more the queen opened and read the letters he was carrying. Ill pleased with their contents, she substituted other letters, under the king's seal, in which Elda and the Bishop were commanded, on pain of death, to prepare a ship and store it with provisions for five years, and to banish Constance and her son therein.

These letters so saddened Elda and the Bishop that Constance, perceiving their manner quite changed, feared that her lord was dead and begged them to tell her all the truth. But when they had shewed her the king's letter, she accepted her lord's decree with resignation, being full

of God and ready for all His will and ordinances. On the fourth day, she was exiled, with Maurice, her sweet son.

Her ship was guided by God into the Spanish sea and came to land under the castle of an admiral of the paynims. She was brought up from her ship to the castle and well refreshed with meat and drink; after which, the Admiral gave her in charge to his seneschal, Thelous, who was a renegade from the Christian faith. Thelous confessed to Constance his sin in renouncing his faith and begged to go with her to some Christian land. But when they were upon the high seas, being tempted by the devil, he endeavored to entice her to sin. Having turned aside his purpose for the moment, by reminding him of the presence of her child, she presently begged him to look out for land; and when he was most intent, she came privily behind his back and pushed him into the sea.

King Alle, on his return from Scotland,

learned that his wife had been banished, for which he and his men were treated with great disdain by all they met. Arrived at his castle, he summoned Elda and Lucius and asked them what made them write such treasonable letters. They showed him the counterfeit letters which they had received under his seal. Whereupon, the messenger was examined and acknowledged his drunkenness at Domild's court. The king went straightway to his mother and commanded her to show the letters which she had treacherously counterfeited. Overtaken with sudden fear, she begged for mercy and confessed her crime; but the king would have no mercy upon her, but hewed her to pieces as she lay in her bed.

In the fifth year of her exile, Constance met with a great Roman fleet, riding at anchor in a haven. The mariners brought the lady and her child to a palace, where she found a senator, named Arsenius, whom she knew, though he did not recognize her. He informed her that the fleet had

been sent by the emperor against the Saracens, who had murdered his daughter. The senator and his host had found the bodies of all the murdered Christians, but had not found the body of the emperor's daughter. Arsenius took her to Rome and commended her to his wife, Helen, who was Constance's cousin. Constance and her son remained twelve years with Arsenius, and he and his wife, who had no children of their own, looked upon Maurice as their son and heir.

Then King Alle made a pilgrimage to Rome to get absolution from the Pope for the slaying of his mother; and when he was seven days' journey from the city, he sent Elda forward to find honorable quarters. Elda chose the castle of Arsenius. When Constance heard the news, she swooned for secret joy. Arsenius and the chivalry of Rome went out to meet the king. Constance instructed her son, who was then in his eighteenth year, that when he should go to the feast with his lord the senator, he should leave all other

things and put himself before the king of England; for he greatly resembled his mother. King Alle, struck with the lad's resemblance to his wife, asked him whose son he was. When he heard that the lad's name was Maurice, he asked whether he might see the youth's mother. So when he was come to the senator's palace, his wife appeared; and Alle embraced her and cried out, 'I have found my wife.'

Forty days thereafter, Constance besought her husband to invite the emperor to a feast, and Maurice was charged with the message. At first, the emperor would not consent to come, but when Maurice besought him by the love he bore the soul of his daughter Constance, he yielded. King Alle and his company went forth to meet the emperor; and Constance made herself known to her father, who was so overwhelmed with joy that he well nigh fell from his horse. Then, with good right, they made great joy, and Constance told her father all her adventures.

Trivet concludes his narrative by relating how Tiberius, on account of his great age, made Maurice co-emperor with himself, and how Alle died in England, nine months after his return, and how Constance died a year later, 'in the year of the incarnation five hundred eighty four, on St. Clement's day.'¹

An examination of Chaucer's additions to the story reveals to us two important facts.² Wherever Constance speaks, she prays or expresses her implicit faith in God; and where she neither speaks nor acts, Chaucer takes the occasion to give us little human touches which directly or indirectly make Constance appeal to us as an individual.

1 R. D. French: "A Chaucer Handbook," pp. 224-30.

2 The passages are: Ll. 190-203, 270-87, 295-315, 330-43, 351-71, 400-10, 421-27, 449-62, 470-504, 631-58, 701-14, 771-84, 811-19, 825-68, 925-45, 1037-43, 1052-78, 1132-41 (Brock.) R. D. French: "A Chaucer Handbook," p. 231.

Constance to be sent to sea alone, her prayer reveals her implicit faith in divine protection at the same

1 "Tale of the Man of Law," ll. 274-307

When Constance takes leave of her father to part for the "Barbre nacioun," both her physical and spiritual nature are apparent in her last words to him.

"'Fader,' she sayde, 'thy wrecched child Custance,
Thy yonge doghter, fostred up so softe,
And ye, my moder, my soverayn plesance
Over alle thing, out-taken Crist on-lofte,
Custance, your child, hir recomandeth ofte
Un-to your grace, for I shal to Surryë,
Ne shal I never seen yow more with yë.

Allas! un-to the Barbre nacioun
I moste anon, sin that it is your wille;
But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun,
So yeve me grace, his hestes to fulfillle;
I, wrecche womman, no fore though I spille.
Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,
And to ben under mannes governance.'" ¹

And again when the Sultan's mother has caused Constance to be sent to sea alone, her prayer reveals her implicit faith in divine protection at the same

¹"Tale of the Man of Lawe," Ll. 274-287

time that it lets us see that Constance is mortal, and that the sea holds for her those same dangers that it holds for all of us.

When Chaucer takes it upon himself to comment upon her, "She blesseth hir, and with ful pitous voys of her humilitee, Un-to the croys of Crist thus seyde she, 'O clere, o welful auter, holy croys, Reed of the lambes blood full of pitee, That wesh the world fro the olde iniquitee, Me fro the feend, and fro his clawes kepe, That day that I shal drenchen in the depe.

But he, that staif for our redempcioun, Victorious tree, proteccioun of trewe, That only worthy were for to bere The king of heven with his woundes newe, The whyte lamb, that hurt was with the spere, Flemer of feendes out of him and here On which thy limes feithfully extenden, Me keep, and yif me might my lyf t'amenden.'" 1

It is unnecessary for us to examine more of

1 "Tale of the Man of Lawe," Ll. 449-462.

Constance's speeches, for all of them are of a similar nature, revealing to us both her perfection as to type and her underlying humanity.

When Chaucer takes it upon himself to comment upon Constance's plight, we are made further aware of her human nature by his realism in his reference to a champion; but even here, the realism is tempered by his allusion to Christ as the unfailing champion.

They ate, and drinke, and dance, and singe,
 "Allas! Custance! thou hast no champioun,
 Ne fighte canstow nought, so weylaway!
 But he, that starf for our redempcioun
 And bond Sathan (and yit lyth ther he lay)
 So be thy stronge champioun this day!
 For, but-if Crist open miracle kythe,
 Withouten gilt thou shalt be slayn as swythe." ¹

Chaucer's comment on the marriage of Constance and Alla throws additional light on the more personal aspect of her character, but even here his digression is so terse that it in no way detracts from the perfect-

¹ "Tale of the Man of Lawe," Ll. 631-637.

tion with which she has previously been drawn.

"Me list nat of the chaf nor of the stree
 Maken so long a tale, as of the corn.
 What sholde I tellen of the royaltee
 At mariage, or which cours gooth biforn,
 Who bloweth in a trompe or in an horn?
 The fruit of every tale is for to seye;
 They ete, and drinke, and daunce, and singe,
 and pleye.

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;
 For, thogh that wyves been ful holy thinges,
 They moste take in pacience at night
 Swich maner necessaries as been plesinges
 To folk that han y-wedded hem with ringes,
 And leye a lyte hir holinesse asyde
 As for the tyme; it may no bet bityde." 1

And what could be more human than Constance's reaction when she is to meet Alla again after so many years of separation?

1 "Tale of the Man of Lawe," Ll. 701-714.

"And, after noon, hoom with the senatour
 Goth Alla, for to seen this wonder chaunce.
 This senatour dooth Alla greet honour,
 And hastifly he sente after Custaunce.
But trusteth weel, hir liste nat to daunce
Whan that she wiste wherefor was that sonde.
Unnethe up-on hir feet she mighte stonde. 1

It is unnecessary to carry the examination fur-
 ther for we can reach but one conclusion. Chaucer's
 success in the depiction of this perfect woman is due
 to the fact that he did not tell us too much, or let
 Constance do or say enough, to make her so human that
 she ceased to be perfect; and at the same time, those
 things which she was permitted to say and do, or which
 were said about her, were of such a nature that they
 suggested the type of the perfect woman, faithful,
 loving, kind, hopeful, and tolerant, while revealing
 to us the heart and mind of a creature of flesh and
 blood. It is impossible to analyse this character of
 Constance in any way other than to say that she is

1 "Tale of the Man of Lawe," Ll. 1044-1050.

perfect. It is because of this perfection and the consequent lack of complexity that Chaucer had such a problem in creating a character and avoiding the pit into which Milton fell.

GRISELDA

GRISELDA

"But I beseech you, as most I may, that you
 inflict not on her those pangs which you in-
 flicted whilere on her who was sometime yours.*" 1

"O thing biseke I yow and warne also,
 That ye ne prikke with no tormentinge
 This tendre mayden, as ye han don mo;" 2

Although we do not possess evidence that Chaucer ever read the "Decameron" of Boccaccio, and critics are agreed that, as the Clerk of Oxenford is made to say, the immediate source of his tale is a Latin version by Petrarch, we do know that the source of Petrarch's version is the tenth story of the tenth day of the "Decameron," and it is

1 John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 522.
 The Italian is, "Ma quanto posso vi priego, che quelle
 punture, le quali all'altra, che vostra fu, gia deste,
 non diate a questa."

2 "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 1037-1039.

to this that we go for the original conception of the character of Griselda. peasant and bath of her two oaks.

As for the story itself, it is sufficient to note here that in spite of the freedom of Petrarch's Latin version and Chaucer's somewhat free rendering of this, Chaucer made no essential changes in the theme of the story. It is mainly in the character of Griselda that Chaucer displays his art, and it is into her character that we wish to examine. I think that the essential development which Chaucer makes in his heroine hinges upon the itali-cized portion of the quotations given above, if this translation of the Italian is correct as I believe it is, and if we are to accept the commonly accepted meaning of "mo" as "more" or "others." Chaucer's Griselda is infinitely more patient and less egoistic than is Boccaccio's. A contrast of these two ideas will be made later.

The central narrative of both his and Chaucer's version is given by Boccaccio in the introduction to his story.

"When The Marquess of Saluzzo, constrained by the prayers of his vassals to marry, but determined to

do it after his own fashion, taketh to wife the daughter of a peasant and hath of her two children, whom he maketh believe to her to put to death; after which, feigning to be grown weary of her and to have taken another wife, he letteth bring his own daughter home to his house, as she were his new bride, and turneth his wife away in her shift; but, finding her patient under everything, he fetcheth her home again, dearer than ever, and showing her her children grown great, honoureth and letteth honour her as Marchioness." 1

This thoughtful markie spak us to this mardo

There are certain very evident traits of character which both Boccaccio and Chaucer have bestowed upon their heroine. On the occasion of the Marquis calling to claim his bride, we are struck with Griselda's humility and reverence in the presence of the lord of her country.

And to the markie ebe his fader fette."

"When the marquess saw her, he called her by name,

1 John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 517.
 1 John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 516.

2 "Chaucer's Tales," ll. 236-271.

to wit, Griselda, and asked her where her father was; to which she answered bashfully, 'My Lord, he is within the house.'" 1

" And as she wolde over hir threshfold goon,
The markis cam and gan hir for to calle;
And she set doun hir water-pot anoon
Bisyde the threshfold, in an oxes stalle,
And doun up-on hir knees she gan to falle,
And with sad contenance kneleth stille
Til she had herd what was the lordes wille.

This thoghtful markis spak un-to this mayde
Ful sobrely, and seyde in this manere,
'Wher is your fader, Griseldis?' he sayde,
And she with reverence, in humble chere,
Answerde, 'lord, he is al redy here.'
And in she gooth with-outen lenger lette,
And to the markis she hir fader fette." 2

1 John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p.517.

2 "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 288-301.

In this instance alone we can see a heightening of color and an increase in the depth of this phase of Griselda's character which is not evident in Boccaccio's heroine.

Previous to this, when Gualtieri (Walter of Chaucer's story), decided upon Griselda for his wife, Boccaccio is very matter of fact and tells us little or nothing about her.

"Now the fashions of a poor girl, who was of a village near to his house, had long pleased Gualtieri, and himseeming she was fair enough, he judged that he might lead a very comfortable life with her; wherefore, without seeking farther, he determined to marry her and sending for her father, who was a very poor man, agreed with him to take her to wife." ¹

Chaucer takes this same opportunity to tell us not only of her poor estate and of her fairness, but also of her lack of worldly appetites, her steadfastness, her industry, and her devotion to filial duty.

¹ John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 517.

"But for to speke of vertuouse beautee,
 Than was she oon the faireste under sonne;
 For povreliche y-fostred up was she,
 No likerous lust was thurgh hir herte y-ronne;
 Wel offer of the welle than of the tonne
 She drank, and for she wolde vertu please,
 She knew wel labour, but non ydel ese.

But thogh this mayde tendre were of age,
 Yet in the brest of hir virginitee
 Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage;
 And in greet reverence and charitee
 Hir olde povre fader fostred she;
 A fewe sheep spinning on feeld she kepte,
 She wolde nocht been ydel til she slepte.

And whan she hoomward cam, she wolde bringe
 Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
 The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir livinge,
 And made hir bed ful harde and no-thing softe;
 And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte
 With everich obeisaunce and diligence
 That child may doon to fadres reverence." ¹

¹ "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 211-231.

Likewise, both Boccaccio and Chaucer speak of Griselda's intelligence and consequent ability to fulfill her duties as marquise after her marriage.

"Brief, it was no great while ere she knew so to do that, not only in her husband's marquise, but everywhere else, she made folk talk of her virtues and her welldoing and turned to the contrary whatever had been said against her husband on her account, whenas he married her." ¹

"Thus Walter lowly, nay but royally,
Wedded with fortunat honestete,
In goddes pees liveth ful esily
At hoom, and outward grace y-nogh had he;
And for he saugh that under low degree
Was ofte vertu hid, the peple him helde
A prudent man, and that is seyn ful selde.

Nat only this Grisildis thurgh hir wit
Coude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinessse,

¹ John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 518.

But eek, whan that the cas requyred it,
 The commune profit coude she redresse,
 Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevinesse
 In al that lond, that she ne coude apese,
 And wysly bringe hem alle in reste and ese.

Though that hir housbonde absent were anon,
 If gentil men, or othere of hir contree
 Were wrothe, she wolde bringen hem atoon;
 So wyse and rype wordes hadde she,
 And jugements of so greet equitee,
 That she from heven sent was, as men wende,
 Peple to save and every wrong t'amende." ¹

In this instance also do we see Chaucer's tendency to emphasize Griselda's personality and strength of character.

Their first essential difference becomes evident when we see the different reactions of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's Griselda to the torments inflicted by the marquis as a test of her patience and loyalty. Boccaccio is

¹ "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 421-441.

careful to let us see that Griselda is a mere woman and that no matter what the outward appearances were, inwardly she suffered and was probably as resentful of such treatment as would be any normal woman under the same circumstances. When the servant is sent to take her first child from her, presumably to put it to death -

"The lady, hearing this and seeing the servant's aspect and remembering her of her husband's words, concluded that he had enjoined him put the child to death; whereupon, without changing countenance, albeit she felt a sore anguish at heart, she straightway took her from the cradle and having kissed and blessed her, laid her in the servant's arms, saying, 'Take her and punctually do that which thy lord hath enjoined thee; but leave her not to be devoured of the beasts and the birds, except he command it thee.'" ¹

In spite of the evil aspect and the ill report of this servant sent for her child, and in spite of the fact

¹ John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 519.

that "She wende he wolde han slawen it right tho," Chaucer's Griselda "neither weep ne syked, consenting hir to that the markis lyked." Chaucer's heroine was to be a super-woman, patient beyond all credulity, through her two-fold devotion as a wife and as a subject.

"I trowe that to a norice in this cas
 It had ben hard this rewthe for to se;
 Wel mighte a moder than han cryed 'allas!'
 But natheless so sad stedfast was she,
 That she endured all adversitee,
 And to the sargeant mekely she sayde,
 'Have heer agayn your litel yonge mayde.'" ¹

Whatever the implication may be, the fact remains that Chaucer does not mention her "sore anguish at heart," as does Boccaccio.

Throughout the remaining trials to which Walter subjects Griselda, Chaucer has as his keynote, patience beyond all understanding, until he reaches its epitome in the statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

1 "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 561-567.

When Walter, after having put Griselda away, ostensibly to take another wife, recalls her to make the arrangements for his new bride, as a further trial of her patience he asks her, "'How lyketh thee my wyf and hir beautee?'" The difference of one word in her answer marks the difference between Chaucer's and Boccaccio's heroine.

"But I beseech you, as most I may, that you inflict not on her those pangs which you inflicted whilere on her who was sometime yours." 1

"O thing biseke I yow and warne also,
That ye ne prikke with no tormentinge
This tendre mayden, as ye han don me." 2

The difference is too obvious to need further comment.

It is unnecessary to go into greater detail to show what Chaucer has done with the character of Griselda. It is sufficient to say as a final word that Chaucer has Griselda prove herself in both prosperity and adversity,

1 John Payne: "The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio," p. 522.

2 "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 1037-1039.

and that never once is she tainted by the slightest suspicion of rebellion. Throughout, she has retained her own individuality, and her strength of character is unequalled.

Whether in keeping with Chaucer's own sentiments or not, Griselda at least temporarily convinces us that -

"A wyf, as of hir-self, no-thing ne sholde
Wille in effect, but as hir housband wolde." ¹

As to certain criticism of Griselda's character which Professor Root suggests may come from modern readers, I make use of Professor Root's statement of, and answer to, this criticism.

"What are we to think of this matchless patience? Most modern readers, particularly women readers, I suppose, will think it ridiculous, if not positively criminal. Imagine a convention of woman's rights advocates debating the conduct of Griselda! 'Miserable, weak-spirited creature!' one hears them shriek. But those were the days

¹ "Clerk's Tale," Ll. 720-721.

when women still promised at the altar to obey their lords, and considered the promise as something more than a meaningless phrase. Moreover, Griselda was not only her husband's wife, but his subject as well; and the obligation of the vassal to obey the lord was only less sacred than man's obligation to obey his God. Griselda merely lives up strictly to the letter and spirit of her obligation, and, one may add, to the letter and spirit of the command that we 'resist not evil,' a command which our modern world has agreed to ignore. But, some one exclaims, is not a woman's first duty to protect her offspring, and is not Griselda virtually an accomplice before the act to what she supposes to be the murder of her children? A duty, doubtless, and a sacred one; but by what authority do we call it her 'first duty'? Mothers have been known to urge their sons on to almost certain death in battle; and the deed has been called one of noble patriotism. There is an old story, not yet quite forgotten, of a father who stood ready to sacrifice an only son, at what he believed to be

the command of his God. He may have been mistaken; Griselda may have been mistaken; perhaps we shall one day be so civilized that the Spartan mother will no longer be held up as a model. The question of precedence in moral duties is a more troublesome one than any that has vexed the master of ceremonies at a court levée; and each age must be left to settle the matter for itself. Griselda merely put in practice what all her contemporaries held in theory. Petrarch was a man of enlightened views, far in advance of his age; yet it did not occur to him to question the rightness of her conduct. He tells, in one of his letters, how he once gave the tale to a friend, and asked him to read it aloud. The friend broke down in the middle of the reading, and could not continue for his tears. I am not arguing the question on its merits; I merely insist that he who would read the tale aright must imaginatively think himself into the spirit of a time long past, in which men held principles quite other than ours, but in which, as in our own, there were found those

who would answer unflinchingly to the stern voice of duty. Unquestioning obedience to duty is a quality too noble and too rare in any age to suffer us to question too nicely the occasion which calls it forth. The tale is, as Ten Brink calls it, 'the Song of Songs of true and tender womanhood.'" ¹

¹ R. K. Root: "The Poetry of Chaucer," pp. 259-260.

ALICE, WIFE OF BATH

THE WIFE OF BATH

Among all of his diverse and highly entertaining characters, the Wife of Bath stands forth as Chaucer's great original creation, and the most entertaining and thought provoking of them all. It is true that he is indebted to the "Roman de la Rose" for the mere suggestion of her type, but critics are unanimously agreed that the debt goes no further, and that the developement of the type into a character is wholly Chaucer's own.¹

Chaucer's method of characterizing the Wife of Bath is that of self-revelation, in the prologue to her tale and in the tale itself. No discussion of her character would be complete, however, without the following discussion and description of her, found in the general prologue to the "Canterbury Tales."

"A good Wyf was ther of bisyde Bathe,
 But she was som-del deaf, and that was scathe.
 Of clooth-making she hadde swiche an haunt,
 She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.

1 "Roman de la Rose". The character of La Vieille.

In al the parisshe wyf ne was ther noon
That to th' offring bifore hir sholde goon;
And if ther dide, certeyn, so wrooth was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.
Hir coverchiefs ful fyne were of ground;
I dorste swere they weyden ten pound
That on a Sondag were upon hir heed.
Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
Ful streite y-teyd, and shoos ful moiste and newe.
Bold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe.
She was a worthy womman al hir lyve,
Housbondes at chirche-dore she hadde fyve,
Withouten other companye in youthe;
But therof nedeth nat to speke as nouthe.
And thryes hadde she been at Jerusalem;
She hadde passed many a straunge streem;
At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
In Galice at seint Jame, and at Coloigne.
She coude muche of wandring by the weye;
Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye.

Up-on an amblere esily she sat,
 Y-wimpled wel, and on hir heed an hat
 As brood as is a bokeler or a targe;
 A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,
 And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.
 In felawschip wel coude she laughe and carpe.
 Of remedies of love she knew perchaunce,
 For she coude of that art the olde daunce. ¹

To quote all of the passages from the Wife of Bath's prologue, which reveal her character, would necessitate quoting this prologue almost in its entirety. I shall confine myself here to certain essential passages and to conclusions reached on the basis of the prologue as a whole.

This prologue reveals the Wife of Bath to us at first glance as being fundamentally and thoroughly a sensualist. In her own words, after having had at "Chirche-dore" five husbands, "withouten (as well as) other companye in youthe," the sixth husband will be welcomed "whan that ever he shal." Undoubtedly Dame Alice is a

1 "The Prologue," Ll. 445-476.

sensualist, and we can expect her every act to be colored, if not governed, by this basic passion. But are we to assume that Chaucer intended to entertain us with a little coarseness and nothing more? This assumption would be as distorted as would be the good wife's character had Chaucer portrayed it with this one side alone.

What, then, was Chaucer's purpose in giving us a character so essentially animal? Because man is physically animal, and through this type of character he could discuss freely certain general ideas relative to the supremacy of the sexes, and specifically the question of mating, both of which questions were utterly taboo to the layman from the viewpoint of the church. Chaucer is attempting to prove ~~through~~ through the Wife of Bath the thesis which was in direct opposition to the dictates of the church, namely, that marriage is as honorable an estate as virginity, and that in the married state, since one of the two must be subordinate, the woman should be in authority and the husband should yield to her. Whether these were Chaucer's own views or not it would be impossible to say, but it is certain that he

enjoyed the portrayal of this character immensely. Likewise, whether Chaucer succeeds in proving his thesis will not be argued here, since we are interested primarily in a discussion of the character of the Wife of Bath. For half so boldly can they no man

We must admit without question that Chaucer attributes to Dame Alice a great deal of wisdom to compensate for her lack of virtue. Otherwise, how could she have held successfully five husbands? Physical attraction alone would not have been sufficient to balance her many infidelities. An innate knowledge of human nature must certainly have been a part of her equipment. And that her marriages were successful we have her own statement. His her selfishness and greed as

evidenced by the address to which she goes to obtain

from her "I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,

That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe,

To bringe me gaye thinges fro the fayre," 1

Atte ends I hadde the better in ech degree.

Through her explanation of how she managed her husbands we have her bared to us as a consummate liar and a cheat.

1 "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," ll. 224-224.

1 "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," ll. 219-221.

"Now herkneth , how I bar me proprely,
 Ye wyse wyves, that can understonde.
 Thus shul ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde;
 For half so boldely can ther no man
 Swere and lyen as a womman can.
 I say nat this by wyves that ben wyse,
 But-if it be whan they hem misavyse
 A wys wyf, if that she can hir good,
 Shal beren him on hond the cow is wood,
 And take witnessse of hir owne mayde
 Of hir assent; but herkneth how I sayde." 1

We may add to this her selfishness and greed as
 evidenced by the extremes to which she goes to obtain
 from her husbands, or others, clothing and jewels.

"And thus of o thing avaunte me,
 Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degree,
 By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thing,
 As by continuel murmur or grucching;

1 "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," Ll. 224-234.

Namely a-bedde hadden they meschaunce,
 Ther wolde I chyde and do hem no plesaunce;
 I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
 If that I felte his arm over my syde,
 Til he had maad his raunson un-to me;
 Than wolde I suffre him do his nycetee.
 And ther-fore every man this tale I telle,
 Winne who-so may, for al is for to selle.
 For winning wolde I al his lust endure,
 And make me a feyned appetyt;
 And yet in bacon hadde I never delyt;
 That made me that ever I wolde hem chyde." 1

But are we to leave Dame Alice with this feeling that there is nothing admirable in her character, that she is wholly reprehensible? Chaucer did not intend this, for he has let us see in many ways that she was not satisfied with her lascivious life. Her own interpretation of her horoscope is one convincing proof of this.

1 "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," Ll. 403-419.

"For certes, I am al Venerien
 In felinge, and myn herte is Marciën.
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse.
 Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.
Allas! allas! that ever love was sinne!
 I folwed ay myn inclinacioun
 By vertu of my constellacioun;
 That made me I coude nocht withdrawe
 My chambre of Venus from a good felawe
 Yet have I Martes mark up-on my face,
 And also in another privee place.
 For, god so wis be my savacioun,
 I ne loved never by no discrecioun,
 But ever folwede myn appetyt,
 Al were he short or long, or blak or whyt;
 I took no kepe, so that he lyked me,
 How pore he was, ne eek of what degree." 1

Our most convincing proof of this, however, lies in the story which the Wife of Bath chooses to tell. When

1 "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," Ll. 609-626.

she has the opportunity to give free rein to her emotions, to be freed under the guise of a story, of all of the inhibitions and restrictions which she may have felt encompassing her in her personal conduct, we are struck with the freedom from coarseness and the singular delicacy by which her narration is marked. Through the central theme of the story, the sovereignty of woman over man, the tale is unquestionably suited to the Wife of Bath, and through her manner of narration, we are given our final clue to her character. She is a wonderful, human creation which baffles and puzzles us as does an actual human personality with which we come in contact. In Hamlet, and again in Falstaff, Shakespeare has given us this same enigmatic sort of character. The Wife of Bath has in her character, as do these two, that strange flux and contradiction which renders an analysis of them all eternally baffling. However, I think that in the final analysis Professor Root's interpretation of her character is as good as any at which we may arrive.

"This apparently incongruous coexistence of coarseness and delicacy furnishes us, I think,

with the key to her whole character. I conceive of the Wife of Bath as endowed originally with strong passions and vivid imagination, with what we are wont to call the poetic temperament. Had she been born in a palace, she might have become your typical heroine of romance, her inevitable lapses from virtue gilded over with the romantic adornments of moonlight serenades and secret trysts. But born heiress to a weaver's bench, there was no chance for her poetic imaginativeness to develop. Laughed at by others for her fine-spun fancies, she would certainly grow ashamed of them herself. I can believe that her excessive coarseness of speech was originally an affectation assumed to conceal the natural fineness of her nature, an affectation which easily became a second nature to her. Her strong passions demanded expression; and denied a more poetical gratification, and quite unrestrained by moral character, they expressed themselves in coarse vulgarity. It is only when called upon to tell a story, to

leave the practical every-day world, in which she is forced to live, for the other world of fantasy, that the original imaginativeness of her nature finds opportunity to reveal itself. If this conception of the Wife of Bath be correct, her character becomes almost a tragic one, or at any rate belongs to that higher realm of comedy which borders on tears." ¹

With regard to what Chaucer has accomplished through this character, I think that we may say that he has given us our first modern woman; and if these views are to be accepted as Chaucer's own, he was among the first in mediaeval England to acknowledge the fact that man and woman are not entirely monogamous, and that some relaxation, if not a radical change, was necessary in the rigid views held by the church, if the institution of marriage was to continue its existence.

¹ R. K. Root; "The Poetry of Chaucer," pp. 239-240.

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