

On the Female Narrative in The Canterbury Tales from the Perspective of New Historicism

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ABSTRACT

New Historicism emphasizes the interplay between history and text, proposing an interpretation of literary works that focuses on the "textuality of history" and the "historicity of text." This paper, adopting a New Historicist approach, delves into the interpretation of female figures in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer employs a framework-like structural form, depicting in fragmented textual fashion, whether on a large or small scale, the diverse life situations of women within the medieval context. In the New Historicist perspective, the design of female characters not only literarily reflects history but also facilitates the shaping of historical culture. It reveals the contradictions and harmonies between history and text, accomplishing the interaction between literature and history.

KEYWORDS

New Historicism; Female Images; *The Canterbury Tales*; Chaucer.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of New Historicism is rooted in a profound and complex socio-cultural background, as well as the inherent reasons within the development and innovation of the humanities and literary criticism itself. New Historicism focuses on a reciprocal dialogue between the past and the present, inspiring novel conceptualizations in the way literature is approached, history is comprehended, and the intricate relationship between the two is navigated. It bears significant temporal implications. The study of female characters in *The Canterbury Tales* often originates from a feminist critical perspective, yet it consistently operates within the discourse authorized by men, lacking the significance of historical context. Therefore, the author attempts to employ New Historicism to comparatively analyze Chaucer's portrayal of numerous female characters and the temporal historical consciousness pervasive throughout the text, unraveling the contradictions and harmonies inherent in history and the text.

2. NEW HISTORICISM AND THE CANTERBURY TALES

2.1. Definition and Development of New Historicism

"The poetics of culture" proposed by the New Historicist scholar Stephen Greenblatt refers to a strategy of reading historical-literary texts that emerges from a blend of methods describing historical texts and a literary theory aimed at exploring their inherent meanings. New Historicists contend that power profoundly influences literature, and literary criticism should focus on the dynamics of suppression and rebellion between mainstream societal ideologies and their subversive counterparts.

New Historicism emerged in the cultural and literary spheres of the English and American contexts in the 1980s. Its early signs were evident by the late 1970s, gradually evolving as a novel critical approach within the field of Renaissance studies. The distinctive method of interpreting the historical implications of literary texts gained increasing recognition within Western literary theory circles.

2.2. Brief Introduction of The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of poetic stories, imbued with poetic elements, where Chaucer innovatively employs the London dialect, daringly incorporates dramatic monologues, and integrates the distinctive "Chaucerian humor." Simultaneously, he amalgamates various literary genres such as knightly legends, tragedy, sermon, and fable, providing a panoramic depiction of medieval English society. While inheriting the classical literary traditions of England, Chaucer's nuanced portrayal of female characters should not be overlooked, thus enriching medieval English literature. Analyzing these representative stories from the perspective of New Historicism criticism helps to examine their intricacies with a more dialectical and impartial approach.

2.3. Profound Representations of Female Figures

The remarkable quality of the 24 stories in The Canterbury Tales is intricately linked to Chaucer's profound characterization of female roles.

The narratives presented by the Wife of Bath are particularly noteworthy. This woman, who has been married five times, simultaneously challenges the strict moral codes prescribing female chastity while posing a intriguing question in her stories: "What is the thing that women most desire?" The origin of the question stems from a knight in King Arthur's court who, having wrongfully violated a maiden, incurred guilt. To absolve himself of the wrongdoing, he must answer the queen's posed question. Perplexed, the knight eventually marries an ugly woman and, in doing so, obtains the answer. He reports to the queen, "A woman wants the self-same sovereignty over her husband as over her lover, and master him; he must not be above her. That is women's greatest wish."

The Miller's Tale, characterized by an almost carnival-esque style, initiates a satire on marital fidelity through a portrayal of extramarital affairs. In the story, the carpenter's wife, Alison, does not love her husband as he is "dull-witted," while she is described as having "great ambition." Shortly after marriage, Alison engages in an extramarital affair with Nicholas, all the while tormenting her other suitor, Absalon. When Alison spends an intimate night with her lover, Absalon, lacking in subtlety, insists on seeking a kiss from her beneath the window.

Melibeus's story contains a more nuanced attitude towards female writing: women begin to speak. The wife speaks eloquently, using profound knowledge and virtue to persuade Melibeus to abandon thoughts of revenge and return to the obedient and humble stance within the orthodox theological thought system.

3. TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY

3.1. Characteristics and Significance

Hayden White posits that the history we perceive is merely a linguistically crafted discourse, involving the deliberate editing, juxtaposition, organization, and processing of the unordered events that transpired in the past. The textuality of history encompasses two layers of meaning: firstly, the idea that without preserved texts, we are unable to comprehend the genuine and complete past of a society, making texts a window through which people perceive history; secondly, when these texts transform into "documents" and serve as the foundation for writing history, they once again function as mediators for textual interpretation, inevitably allowing human subjectivity to permeate the text.

3.2. Analysis of Female Portrayals in The Canterbury Tales

The art of marital dominance seems to unequivocally exemplify the assertiveness of female consciousness. In the collection of 24 stories, this is not a solitary notion.

"Dark was the night as pitch, as black as coal, and at the window out she put her hole, and Absalon, so fortune framed the farce, put up his mouth and kissed her naked arse." This seemingly indecent passage, however, warrants deeper investigation. In Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Grotesque Realism, the dominance of the "material—bodily" elements governs richness, growth, and overflowing emotions, where the "lower bodily stratum is always the point of life's beginning." The bodily inscription involving the "lower stratum" manifests a vibrant theatricality of bodily life, encompassing themes of copulation, childbirth, growth, consumption, and excretion. This depiction of the "point of life's beginning" serves as a mockery of men, and Alison can be considered an embodiment of the wisdom celebrated in Bakhtin's folk humorous culture. As a woman, she seemingly seizes reproductive and life rights through her actions, thereby further loosening the originally established hierarchical relationship between men and women.

Women's history has been a history of silence. In the New Testament of the Bible, although Christianity grants some rights to women, such as believing in Christianity and spreading the gospel, their right to speak has always been confined within the authorized scope of men. However, in the story of Melibeus, on one hand, in the war between women and men, what is taken shifts from the material (reproductive) to the spiritual (discourse). On the other hand, it also carries a rich flavor of anti-Machiavellian political philosophy. The highlighted female consciousness and the advocacy of virtue in classical political thought converge in a shared path: both lead towards politicized actions.

3.3. The Contradictory Nature of Historical Texts

The textuality of history cannot be equated with historical events. The occurrence of historical events is shaped by its context, participants, and, significantly, the recorders. The narrative of historical recording often unconsciously shifts towards the perspective of the recorders. Michel Foucault pointed out the active role of power discourse. The boundary between literary and non-literary texts has been blurred.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, there is a significant amount of portrayal concerning marriage and women. However, if a book were to place these female experiences at the forefront, it would be a misconception to conclude that Chaucer is interested in or praises female consciousness. This is merely a misconception and does not differ from popular romance literature. *The Canterbury Tales* also contains a substantial amount of explicit descriptions. If extensive discussions about desire and sex are considered evidence of Chaucer's progressive breakthrough from the medieval veil, it implies a legitimate position for erotic literature, which is precisely what feminists oppose. The challenge for female readers confronting female writing lies in the inherent paradox and construct of this identity. Is the female identity physiological or a cultural strategy? According to Judith Butler, the gender disparities between physiology and socio-cultural aspects are both socially constructed. Readers are compelled to establish, advocate, and even create the premise of identity (whether physiological or cultural) within *The Canterbury Tales*, assuming it as a precondition.

4. HISTORICITY OF TEXT

4.1. Characteristics and Significance

The first dimension advocated by New Historicism, known as "the textuality of history," posits that individual subjectivity is more or less influenced by the temporal context and prevailing societal ideologies of the era. This leads to the second dimension of New Historicism, termed "the historicity

of text." This cultural implication suggests that historical events and facts are presented in textual form, undergoing a process of textualization—meaning they pass through the subjective consciousness and interpretation of the author, possessing a certain subjectivity and relativity.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the symbolic representation of women as embodiments of the physical and men as embodiments of spiritual discourse, conservative discourse on sexuality, patriarchal discourse, and class-based discourse are all subverted in the novel. However, these subversive forces are also subject to containment, reflecting the influence of societal consciousness on Chaucer.

4.2. Subversion and Containment

As a literary classic, one of its essential elements is historicity. Eliot emphasizes the historical consciousness of the text, a form of insight, as all poets write under the constraints of tradition. Faced with the colossal experiences of tradition, contemporary notions, akin to dwarfs, pose a crisis of self-deconstruction for the narrow-minded feminist critique that joyfully interprets Chaucer's so-called "female consciousness."

For instance, taking the representative product of capitalist societal ideology, the Bible, it symbolizes the faith authority and spiritual belonging of Westerners. However, the Bible also represents the interests of the capitalist ruling order, inevitably bearing the imprint of ruling-class consciousness. God is the absolute authority of faith, and only by following God can people attain the gospel of God.

In the story of the Wife of Bath, who advocates the art of marital dominance, the knight finds the answer to the "greatest desire of women" but is compelled to keep his promise and marry an old and ugly woman. Faced with such a "shrewish wife," the knight becomes gloomy and unable to sleep. The old and ugly woman then defends herself against her old age, poverty, and ugliness one by one. Finally, she poses the question: "To have me old and ugly till I die, but still a loyal, true, and humble wife that never will displease you all her life, or would you rather I were young and pretty and chance your arm what happens in a city where friends will visit you because of me. Yes, and in other places too, maybe. Which would you have?" The old woman's point was exactly about the enduring prevalence of adultery and extravagance as "troubles." In order to fulfill the "greatest desire of women," she chose to be submissive, and as a result, the story took a surprising turn. The old, ugly woman transformed into a beautiful young lady, and from then on, there was nothing she wouldn't do to please him. The irony lies in the fact that while women initially establish their own identities on the surface, they ultimately turn towards satisfying the ultimate desires of men. In the realm of discourse, female control and mastery over males are perpetually confined within the sphere of male authorization, i.e., the legitimacy of female empowerment derives from the consent of males. Ultimately, this consent stems from the male's willingness to project and transfer his power playfully.

4.3. The Canterbury Tales and the Intrinsic Harmony with Medieval History

The awareness of women in *The Canterbury Tales* may have encountered a collapse, but there is nothing that can be faulted. These complex male-female relationships and seemingly abrupt stories together form an internal harmony, and they resonate with the cultural and social traditions of the entire medieval era. The authentic visage of the Middle Ages has already surfaced in the work *The Waning of The Middle Ages* by Johan Huizinga: the Middle Ages were not an era of oppressive darkness and cruelty, but rather, one of brilliant civilizational accomplishments. The material culture and social mores of the Middle Ages formed a civilization community, within which the established relationships between men and women were an integral and inseparable part, accumulated over time.

The attitudes towards women's images and gender relations were characteristically dual in nature during this period. For instance, courtly epics frequently depicted women facing discrimination, insult, and even physical abuse. However, in the epics of this era, the depiction of women was often radiant and commendable. Compared to the tradition of Christian misogyny, a new image of female beauty

emerged in the Middle Ages, even forming fixed standards. However, simultaneously, in real life, treating women as mere objects was not uncommon. Cunneware, as the noblest woman in King Arthur's court, suffered a brutal beating by the court's chief steward for violating a decree. In the 12th century, Father Andreas Capellanus composed the renowned Latin work *De Amore* (On Love), wherein the attainment and maintenance of love were intricately interwoven with the rejection and critique of women's vices. In short, duality formed a distinctive feature of male-female relations in the Middle Ages.

5. CONCLUSION

New Historicism in literary criticism emphasizes the intrinsic connection between literary texts and history. The *Canterbury Tales* were produced within a certain historical and cultural context, yet to some extent, its "dramatization" and "storytelling" arrangement of real historical facts alleviate the opposition and conflict that exist between the literary work and actual history, truly showcasing the close relationship between literature and historical events. On the other hand, examining the female narratives in *The Canterbury Tales*, it would be insufficient to simply conclude that Chaucer praised female consciousness. Emphasizing the historical consciousness permeating the text serves to remind readers once again of the importance of monumental traditional experiences, which is the essence of New Historicism.

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