Female Characters in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Some Recent Approaches to the Theory of Character

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In literary history and criticism little has been said about the theory of character. Characterization is often vaguely described as "the depicting... of clear images of a person," "his actions and manners of thought and life", or as the portrayal of "a man's nature, environment, habits, emotions, desires, instincts." Even less has been said about the ways of characterization: the techniques used in depicting characters have been listed in Wellek and Waren's *Theory of Literature*\(^2\), but, unfortunately, not elaborated. W. J. Harvey accuses E. M. Forster of a "deceptively light" approach to the matter, which, in his opinion, has relegated the treatment of character to the periphery of the attention of modern criticism.\(^3\)

Aristotle's *Poetics* pays the least possible attention to the notion of character. Its second chapter claims that "artists imitate man involved in action". Aristotle sees the character as an agent supposed to perform an action, but not to figure as an independent existent;\(^4\) his traits seem to be insignificant. Here we witness another injustice done to characters: even when recognized as basic elements of the literary text, characters are taken only as agents, not as personalities.

The views of formalist and structuralist critics are similar to Aristotle's, since they argue that characters are functional. Tomashevsky and Propp, for instance, see the character as a function of the plot: in their opinion, the character simply does what the story requires her to do.

However, some structuralist critics have gradually moved away from the functional approach to character. For instance, Tzvetan Todorov admits that a narrative text can either be *plot-centered* (or apsychological), or *character-centered* (also called psychological). In psychological narratives action serves only to depict character, whereas the apsychological texts neglect the character as an independent figure. Roland Barthes has gradually shifted from the functional view of character he had adopted in the sixties, to a psychological one embraced late in the seventies (as can be seen in his book *S/Z*). This signals that the character is gradually gaining in importance, since Barthes and Todorov at least admit that in some narratives characters play a more significant role than elsewhere.

Seymour Chatman argues that characters are narrative constructs which are not alive, but rather lifelike. They are more than agents, yet less than real people. We can describe each character using the terms from the whole range of human experience - psychology, morality,

\(^4\) I am referring to Seymour Chatman's (and, for that matter, structuralist) notion of existent; an existent is an element of the "story" (which is, in Chatman's opinion, the "What" of a narrative text), such as character or setting, opposed to "events".
astrology, etc. Chatman sees the literary character as a personality, but he never makes an attempt to endow it with a life beyond fiction. What he does is trying to establish a code or a paradigm of traits. This attempt is supported by Barthes's more recent claim that reading narratives is a process in which we have to name the traits of the character. The code of traits should explain characters by using an unlimited number of terms which are not hierarchically ordered. This paradigm cannot be constituted in the same way as a linguistic paradigm because its elements are not strictly positioned; they rather act as a perspective of quotations.5

In discussing female characters of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* we will use Chatman's basic division into *what* and *how* to define both the writer's interest and his technique. *What* refers to the traits focused by the narrator, whereas *how* denotes the way of characterization.

In *Canterbury Tales* there is no plot for the characters to act in, so they cannot be considered agents. Chaucer's characters do not act anyway, except for the fact that they narrate their stories. Since their only acts are speech acts, we cannot perceive any development or change in their nature. This is partly due to the fact that the concept of a developing character is not a common type of characterization in the literature of Chaucer's time. "The traditional story called for no growth of character"6; the personal traits do not undergo any progressive or temporal change, and we end up with a gallery of frozen portraits. Nevertheless, although the portrait cannot indicate a change in mood or the flow of thought, it can still be rich in detail and very vivid, as we can see in Chaucer's case.

Chaucer's principal aim is to depict people. The portraits in *The Prologue* are full of direct narrative statements about the characters. These statements name personal traits and inform us about physical appearance, habits or biographical facts about the characters. The reader is faced with an abundance of details which are drawn either from the narrator's outer perception or from his omniscient glimpse into the interior of the character. Thus the *what*, denoting the narrator's focus and interest, can be subdivided into personal *traits* (whether physical or psychological), *habits* and biographical *facts*. The *how* or Chaucer's way of characterization can be described as more rhetorical than psychological. Nothing is *shown* in action, everything is *told*, either by the omniscient author, or by the character herself.

The structure of *Canterbury Tales* is paratactic, since the work juxtaposes individual portraits and tales.7 The order of the tales seems to be random, since the pilgrimage motif serves as the only connection among them. Although the *Canterbury Tales* seem to be unsystematic, they provide their reader with a representative panorama of the fourteenth century society. The panorama starts from the top of the social scale and the highest point of the moral scale, going downward.

Two female characters in *Canterbury Tales* are not quite typical of their class and status. The Prioress's grace, elegance, affectation of speech and manners, as well as Wife of Bath's five marriages, apparently do not fit into mediaeval stereotypes. As we shall see, Chaucer does not

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5 See Chatman, op. cit, chapter *Character- A Paradigm of Traits*, pp. 126-134.
portray two typical women, but rather the opposite poles of woman's nature. He depicts a prioress in terms and traits borrowed from the medieval romance, whereas an artisan woman from beside Bath city resembles a matriarchal goddess aspiring to be the Molly Bloom of the fourteenth century.\(^8\)

Chaucer contrasts feelings embodied in the Prioress with senses of the Wife of Bath. While the Prioress embodies fastidious sensibility, the Wife of Bath is the pole of elemental vitality. We see the Prioress as a woman who submitted to the institution of the Church, trying to fit her temperament into it. She is "simple and coy" and she never curses. However, she subtly violates the laws of her order by keeping pets, overdressing and taking on to a pilgrimage. The Prioress's behaviour and appearance generated numerous arguments among critics, as it is shown in Florence H. Ridley's *The Prioress and the Critics*.\(^9\)

Opposed to Egлentine's passiveness and subtlety are the Wife of Bath's outspokenness, aggressive demonstration of her instincts, appetites and will power. The Wife of Bath makes the institutions of church, pilgrimage and marriage serve to her temperament. Her radix trait is an uninhibited appetite for physical love and travel. Chaucer developed two basic traits of her. The first one is experience; it is the first word in her prologue. The second basic trait is her desire for mastery: her doctrine of marriage is based on female supremacy. Such an outlook is a reaction to the traditional view of marriage which is imposed by the church fathers and common law.

It is interesting to note the way Chaucer manipulates with the mode of medieval romance in characterization of his heroines: while the Prioress physically resembles a romance heroine, the Wife of Bath uses a romantic setting in her story of the magical hag and the rapist. Both ways of using romance are tinged with irony. A prioress is not expected to look romantic, whereas the Wife of Bath uses the romantic setting in order to disguise the idea of female supremacy. Her prologue and her tale are two versions of one story: both Jankyn and the rapist knight treat women with violence, and both are taught to do better than that; they win the woman's kindness and affection once they come round to her way of thinking.

The Wife of Bath is well acquainted with Holy Scripture, and she deconstructs it in the greatest part of her prologue. She picks and chooses the quotations and episodes which support her way of thinking. Her skillful handling of Scripture in the comic debate on marriage shows that she is a knowledgeable woman. Religious issues bring up another interesting contrast between the Wife of Bath and the Prioress: while the Wife of Bath embodies empirical knowledge of facts, the Prioress embodies blind religious faith. The latter is a person of limited mentality, credulous enough to accept naively a legend of a horrible murder of a child committed by Jews, and to recount it. No matter how cruel her story might seem, it is mostly an act of worship. This devoutness and piety is something the worldly Wife of Bath is incapable of.

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While the Wife of Bath is excessively sex-appealing, the Prioress is “ultra-feminine," generally an embodiment of the feelings. Her suppressed maternal instincts turn to the nearest object upon which she can lavish her natural affection - to pets. Chaucer vividly describes her appearance, her habits, likes and dislikes, but we learn practically nothing of her background. What we get are just traits and habits, but no facts! Does this lack of biographical facts suggest that the Prioress is a lifeless, unreal being? And, since we have a Molly-Bloom-like story of husbands and marriages, could we make another opposition, and say that Prioress symbolizes an ideal versus the real woman, deliberately called Wife of Bath?

By contrasting abstract issues, Chaucer manages to create vivid women with many conventional and individual traits. Playing with traits, habits and facts, the writer builds characters which are in a way self-sufficient. They do not act, they only exist, appear and tell their tales as if telling the stories of their lives.

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10 Harold F. Brooks, op. cit. p. 15.