

## **An Elegy to Courtly Love: Rewriting and Reconstructing the Tradition of Courtly Love in Chaucer's Works**

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**Abstract**

As the first great poet to write in English in the history of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer is honored as the "Father of English Poetry". Chaucer explored the development of English language literature against the background of the historic changes in English society, drew on the artistic nourishment of Italian, French and Latin poetry, and insisted on composing in English, establishing the direction of the development of English poetry, opening up a new era of English literature, and laying the foundation for the full prosperity of English literature in the Elizabethan era.

Courtly love, as an important tradition of medieval literature, initially originated in Provence and entered England with the spread of French court culture. Inheriting this tradition, Chaucer's works redefined the connotations of love, marriage and class relations with the help of satire, parody and profound characterization. By analyzing Chaucer's works such as *The Book of the Duchess* and *Parliament of fowls* in the early period of his creation, *Troilus and Criseyde* in the middle period, and *The Canterbury Tales* in the later period, this article explores how Chaucer reconstructed the manifestations and values of courtly love in the light of the social changes in 14th-century England, especially the elevation of women's status and the mobility of social class, to innovate and criticize the traditional theme of courtly love. The article argues that Chaucer reconstructed the traditional concept of courtly love and comprehensively demonstrated the multiple positions and views on marriage and women's issues in English society at that time with an open and tolerant attitude, reflecting the progressiveness of his thought and humanistic concern.

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### **1. Introduction**

Widely regarded as the "Father of English Literature," Geoffrey Chaucer played a pivotal role in shaping the literary landscape of 14th-century England. His most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, provides a nuanced portrayal of medieval society, revealing the social complexities and cultural tensions of the time. One of the key themes of Chaucer's work is his rewriting and reconstruction of courtly love, a literary tradition that began at the courts of medieval Europe. Unlike the idealized depictions of love in earlier courtly poetry, Chaucer reinterprets these ideals with biting satire, irony, and vivid characterization. He not only echoes traditional practices of love and marriage, but also criticizes and challenges them, offering a more complex and often critical view of these practices. Chaucer's subversion of traditional literary forms opened new avenues for understanding the complexities of love, marriage, and social class in medieval society.

For a long time, however, Chaucer scholars, represented by Charles Muscatine, have mainly focused on discussing the influence of the French tradition on Chaucer, and less on Chaucer's

transcendence of the French tradition in the latter part of his creative life. In recent years, some scholars have begun to pay attention to this issue, but most of them have only analyzed the texts of specific works and lacked a systematic study of the evolution of the courtly love tradition in Chaucer's poetry.

In order to address this shortcoming, this paper will discuss Chaucer's influence on the tradition of courtly love in the context of the historical and cultural context of 14th century England. Set within the historical and cultural context of Chaucer's 14th century England, this paper will discuss the three main stages of Chaucer's rewriting of the tradition of courtly love.

In the early poems *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer made attempts to represent the reality of the fourteenth - century English court. Given the reality of the English court in the 14th century, Chaucer rewrote the tradition of courtly love accordingly. In the mid-century poems *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer incorporated elements of realism into the tradition of courtly love. This not only influenced the tradition of courtly love but also revolutionized the portrayal of noblewomen and knights. The figures of the noblewoman and the knight were thus revolutionized. In his later masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer further transcended the limitations of the courtly love tradition. He used "marriage" as a metaphor to express his thoughts on the class conflicts in 14th century England. Chaucer's constant rewriting of the courtly love tradition throughout his poetic career not only reflects the poet's ability to integrate different literary traditions. It also reflects his process of developing his own style through the fusion of different literary traditions and the realities of fourteenth - century England.

## **2. Courtly Love and Social Change: The Historical and Cultural Context Behind Chaucer's Works**

The tradition of courtly love can be traced back to the late 11th century, specifically to the emergence of a new form of lyric poetry in the southern region of Provence, France. The birth of Provençal Lyrics was closely tied to the historical and social context of Western Europe at the time. This period was characterized by a highly open social and cultural atmosphere, filled with values of tolerance, freedom, and innovation. This fluid social environment facilitated trade, economic development, and cultural exchange. (Swabey, 2013). The rise of Provençal Lyrics celebrated the love between noble women and knights, highlighting the moral and spiritual elevation of the knightly character in love, marking the beginning of the European Renaissance in the 12th century.

The emergence of Provençal Lyrics drew the attention of clergymen, feudal lords, and even French nobility, such as Duke William IX of Aquitaine and his granddaughter Eleanor of Aquitaine. These figures promoted poetry and integrated themes of love with the French chivalric literary tradition. Courtly poets like Chrétien de Troyes then introduced courtly love into the already established Arthurian legends, greatly transforming the model of Provençal Lyrics. C. S. Lewis, a noted scholar, argued that courtly love poetry from this period exhibited features such as humility, courtesy, adultery, and a "religion of love" (Lewis, 1936). As devotion to the Virgin Mary reached its peak in the later Middle Ages, the figure of Mary became synonymous with the idealized noblewoman in certain romantic legends. Thomas Cahill notes that "whether through the veneration of the Virgin or the admiration of a lord's wife, both elevated the social status of women" (Cahill, 2011). The "worship of love" characteristic of courtly poetry became more pronounced, with this shift closely tied to the patronage and promotion of courtly women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne. While they may not have been directly involved in composing, they played a significant role as sources of artistic inspiration and critical voices, making an important contribution to the cultural development of the time (Shahar, 2003:175).

Although courtly love poetry originated in Provence and was popularized at the French court,

the poetic tradition spread to England with the marriage of Eleanor to King Henry II. Of the French courtly love poetry to which Chaucer was exposed, the *Roman de la Rose* (*The Legend of the Rose*) by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun had a particularly profound influence on him. According to Derek Pearsall, “*The Legend of the Rose* is a work that Chaucer read with great enthusiasm, a poem that became part of Chaucer’s consciousness and even figured prominently in his personal experience” (Pearsall, 1992:80). Pearsall’s observation highlights the significant influence of *The Legend of the Rose* on Chaucer. However, this does not imply that Chaucer was a passive recipient. Instead, while drawing inspiration from it, Chaucer, through his own astute observations and deep-seated thoughts, innovated within the tradition of courtly love. For instance, in *The Book of the Duchess*, although he adhered to some of the frameworks of courtly love, he adapted it to the reality of the English court. He transformed the common secret love affair in courtly love poems into a celebration of the genuine affection between a married couple. This innovation stands in contrast to the idealized love depictions in *The Legend of the Rose*, demonstrating Chaucer’s departure from the traditional courtly love literature. It shows that he was not merely inheriting but actively reshaping the literary heritage to reflect the social and emotional realities of his time.

Meanwhile, Chaucer’s personal experiences had an equally profound effect on his literary work. The 14th century in which Chaucer lived was an era of struggle and change, with the Hundred Years’ War between England and France, court battles, peasant revolts, the Black Death, and the Reformation causing English society to be in a state of constant turmoil. The royal aristocracy gradually lost control of society, the influence of the Church began to decline, and the feudal hierarchy began to disintegrate. The boundaries between the traditional three classes (laboratories, oratores and bellatores) began to blur, and the rise of the commercial class led to profound changes in 14th-century English society, with the traditional hierarchical system no longer able to provide a place for the emerging classes of merchants, notaries, and bankers (Bisson, 1998:175). In the mid-14th century, the Black Death and the Hundred Years’ War led to a shortage of male labor, which prompted the government to relax restrictions on women’s employment, allowing more women, especially widows, to participate in society’s production and achieve economic independence.

The change in the social status of women had a profound effect on Chaucer’s writing. Pearsall points out that Chaucer was not only concerned with the new merchant class, but was also aware of the increasing participation of women in economic life. His portrayal of the Wife of Bath is a response to this change: “Through the character of the Wife of Bath, Chaucer presents an image of a woman who is economically independent and seeks a voice through her involvement in activities such as the cult of the Virgin Mary, the Lollard movement, and mysticism.” (Pearsall:85). Although a fictionalized character by Chaucer, the gradual increase in the economic and cultural influence of middle-class women embodied by her reflects the dramatic changes in the role of women during Chaucer’s time.

Of particular significance is that the Wife of Bath not only presents herself as a financially independent businesswoman but also serves as an epitome of English women who strived to gain a voice through their participation in the cult of the Virgin Mary, the Lollard movement, and the mystical movement. In 14<sup>th</sup>-century England, the cult of the Virgin Mary not only assisted noblewomen, nuns, and even female mystics in consolidating their statuses but also empowered a large number of middle - class women to establish their authority within the family through home education and guidance of their children’s religious activities. (Wood, 2003:36). Simultaneously, the cult of the Virgin Mary encouraged English women to actively engage in pilgrimages because “the experience of the pilgrimage provided them with a more ‘direct and personal relationship’ with Mary.” (Waller, 2011). Apart from participating in the cult of the Virgin Mary, some English women of that era also attained a higher level of literacy and power by becoming members of the Lollards. This was one of the reasons why the Lollards were condemned as heretics by the Church, for “it is bad enough to allow laypeople access to the Bible, and it is even

worse to allow women to do the same.” (Wood:166). Moreover, with the rise of the mystical movement in England towards the end of the Middle Ages, female mystics represented by Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe began to write books and biographies and even preach in public. Despite strong opposition from the Church, these female mystics broke the long - standing silence of medieval women by expressing religious ideas that incorporated a wealth of female experiences. Although the Wife of Bath is merely a fictional female character created by Chaucer through the integration of various literary traditions and the realities of English society, she reflects, to a certain extent, the changes in the economic status and cultural influence of middle-class women in Chaucer’s time. The voices of English middle-class women in the domestic and public spheres not only echoed the efforts of noblewomen to improve the image of women through courtly love poetry but also, to some extent, resonated with the middle class’s aspiration to enhance their cultural and political status. Thus, during the transformation of 14<sup>th</sup>-century England, there emerged a peculiar convergence of “women’s rights” and “human rights”. English women, who had long been marginalized by patriarchal society, and middle-class men, who struggled to define their positions within the feudal hierarchy, shared some cultural concepts, thereby forming a unique cultural “community”. In the middle and later stages of his creative career, Chaucer was acutely aware of this phenomenon. Therefore, in *The Canterbury Tales*, although there were constant disputes among the pilgrims consisting of declining knights on the fringes of the upper class, men from various walks of life in the middle class, and some economically independent and free-acting women, they “found a way to coexist harmoniously on a practical level, set aside their disputes, and thus reached certain agreements despite the existence of conflicts of interest.” (Strohm, 1989).

Chaucer’s literary career was itself a journey across social classes and cultural traditions. He was born into a merchant family, worked as a courtier and a civil servant, and came into contact with the upper nobility, merchants, and lower-class laborers. His different social experiences made his works reflect the diversity and complexity of the English society at that time. Chaucer was deeply influenced by French court culture and was familiar with French poetry, especially its elegant themes of love and chivalry. He was also heavily influenced by Italian literature, Christianity, and classical culture. However, he did not stick to the traditions, but through his observation and reflection on the social reality of 14th century England, he blended these literary traditions with the social changes of the time and developed a unique style of composition. It is perhaps for this reason that the tradition of courtly love, which had such a major influence on the early years of his career, was constantly rewritten and reconstructed as he explored in increasing depth such themes as “marriage,” “persuasion,” “liberty,” “nobility,” and so on. All these themes were closely associated with the middle classes and women of fourteenth-century England.

### **3. The Continuation and Transformation of Courtly Love in Chaucer’s early poems**

#### **3.1 Courtly Love Revisited—*The Book of the Duchess***

Having delved into the origin, development of courtly love, and the social context of Chaucer’s time, we are now well-positioned to understand how he continued and transformed the tradition of courtly love in his early works.

*The Book of the Duchess*, the first book in Chaucer’s trilogy of fantastic poems, is lovingly dedicated to his patron, the Duke of Lancaster, as a way of honoring the memory of the Duke’s departed wife, Blanche. Despite the Duke of Lancaster’s eminent status in reality, according to the tradition of courtly love, the Black Knight in the poem, modeled after the Duke, transforms into a humble follower in the face of his beloved, and falls into madness after the loss of his beloved, becoming a powerless plaything in the hands of the goddess of love. In stark contrast,

Mrs. White, who is inspired by Mrs. Blanche, is a model of a perfect woman in terms of her looks, character, and demeanor. In her emotional interactions with the Knight in Black, Mrs. White is consistently dominant, calmly and reservedly controlling every step of the relationship. In front of the knight's eager confession, she rejects his love with a simple "no," and it is not until a year later, when she confirms the knight's sincerity, that she finally accepts his feelings and takes on the responsibility of educating and guiding him. The Knight gratefully recalls Mrs. White's teachings by stating, "Whenever I made a mistake, my sweet love always corrected me with gentleness and generosity, while, during my youth, she supervised me severely and never relented." (Fang, 1979:26). Through these descriptions, Chaucer emphasizes the importance of female wisdom in enlightening male development.

Although the love story between the Black Knight and Lady White in *The Book of the Duchess* follows the traditional framework of courtly love, Chaucer skillfully innovates with the realities of the English court to make it more in line with the aesthetic interests of the English aristocracy. Given that the Duke of Lancaster and Lady Blanche were an actual aristocratic couple, Chaucer transformed the "secret love affair" between a knight and a noblewoman, which was common in courtly love poems, into a celebration of the couple's deep love and affection. This change is depicted as "Before Chaucer, medieval poets had confined themselves to depicting illicit love, but Chaucer was the first to break out of this confinement by showing the sincerity of the couple's feelings and making them more relevant to real life. This shift is particularly evident in the later *The Canterbury Tales*, where marriage and the relationship between husband and wife become the central theme of the work." (Xiao, 2005:103).

Analyzing in depth the foresight behind this innovation and rewriting by Chaucer, it is not difficult to see the foresight. As the social structure of society changed drastically in the 14th century, Chaucer began to focus on the actual role of women in the family and in society. In *The Book of the Duchess*, Lady White is not only an idealized image of a noblewoman, but her actions show women's initiative and rationality in marriage. Mrs. White does not blindly respond to the love of the Black Knight, but is guided by reason and accepts his feelings only after confirming that he is sincere. This emphasis on women's autonomy and rational choice reflects Chaucer's redefinition of women's roles in marriage - women are no longer merely passive objects of adoration, but active participants in the decision-making, education and guidance of marriage. Chaucer further emphasizes mutual respect and fidelity between husband and wife, rather than the idolization of love based on the traditional "knight-errant" model. The affection between husband and wife is no longer an idealized love suspended in the air, but a deep bond rooted in real life, emphasizing that in the new social order, marriage is not only a symbol of external power, but also an expression of internal mutual support and respect.

### 3.2 Courtly Love Revisited—*Parliament of fowls eng*

In addition to *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer clearly followed the courtly love tradition in *Parliament of fowls eng*, the final installment of his Fantasy Poetry Trilogy. The poem was written to celebrate the successful marriage of Richard II to Princess Anna of the House of Luxembourg by defeating the Grand Prince of Richard V of France. At a courtship meeting presided over by the goddess of nature, three male eagles court the noble female eagle, and the one representing Richard II promises absolute obedience to the female eagle representing Princess Anna in the future of their married life: "I am wholly hers, and shall be in perpetual service to her, and she shall have as much dominion over me as she can have over my life and my death; and I will honor her as I honor the Queen of Lords, and in the same manner I will ask her for favor and forgiveness, and if I disobey her, I will not hesitate to die in return ....." (Fang:89-90). In addition, the male eagle promises to give the female eagle full freedom: "Since no one has ever been so true to her as I have been to her, even if she has not bowed down to it, she should be my lifelong companion in mercy. I dare not give her any bondage beyond this. However painful it

may be, I will serve her, and dare not slacken; and I will not fear the remoteness of the ends of the earth.” (90). Although the male eagle follows the words fixed by the knight in his courtship of the noblewoman, the female eagle reacts differently from the noblewoman in the tradition of courtly love. Unmoved by the eagle's promises, the female eagle refuses to pick any of the males as her mate, imploring the goddess of nature to give her a year to think about it, and a year after that to make her choice because “I have no intention of being a servant of Venus or Cobbid yet.” (95).

What is remarkable is that Chaucer's rewriting of the courtly love tradition in *Parliament of fowls eng* not only emphasizes the eagle's desire for freedom, but also incorporates the rest of the English class into the poem. The courtship meeting includes, in addition to the three noble eagles, insectivorous birds, waterfowl, and birds that live on plant seeds, which the goddess of nature arranges in different places in the natural garden according to their respective natures: “The predatory raptors sit in the highest place, and then those insectivorous birds, who of course eat other things, which I will not detail at the moment; but the waterfowl and such like are ranked in the hollows of the hills and so on, but the waterfowl sit in the lowest part of the hollows. As for the birds that live on the seeds of plants they sit on the grass, and they are so numerous that they call to mind.” (87). Fang Chong, the translator of Chaucer's Collected Works, paraphrases the ranking of the birds: “This paragraph divides the birds into different classes, representing the various social classes at that time; the predatory raptors sitting at the highest place should refer to the aristocracy, the insectivorous birds are the middle class, the waterfowl refer to the citizens and merchants, and the numerous birds living on plant seeds refer to the peasants.” (Schoeck, 1960:88). Unlike other court poets, Chaucer clearly realized that the middle class, citizen traders, and peasants were also integral parts of 14th-century English society and presented a panoramic view of the various classes in England through the courtship assembly of the crowd of birds in the natural garden.

What is particularly important is that the birds not only participate in the courtship meeting, but are also able to express their opinions when the courtship meeting reaches an impasse. As the courtship of the three noble eagles to the female eagle is extremely lengthy in the tradition of courtly love, the birds, who are impatient to choose a mate, can't stand it and begin to shout: “The conflicting opinions and remonstrances of the birds instantly burst forth. Various dialects, proverbs and witticisms rise and fall, each representing a different worldview from the rest of the discourse.” (Grudin, 1996). In the midst of all the noise, the goddess of nature suggests that each type of bird choose a representative to speak, and only then is she able to quell the crowd's displeasure. Chaucer may have intended the courtship assembly to allude to the growing parliamentary system in England at the time, and Nature's respect and proper handling of the birds' opinions was key to the smooth running of the courtship assembly. The “noble” rule of the goddess of nature is more praiseworthy than the noble status of the eagle and the female eagle. After Chaucer hinted at his own view of “nobility” in *Parliament of fowls eng*, he explored the theme of “nobility” more fully in *The Canterbury Tales* through the mouths of the pilgrims, who were mainly from the middle class, and from different perspectives.

#### **4. The Transformation and Innovation of Courtly Love in Chaucer's mid-century poems—*Troilus and Criseyde***

The rewriting of courtly love in *The Book of the Duchess* and *Parliament of fowls eng* laid a solid foundation for Chaucer's subsequent creations. In his mid-century poems, his exploration of courtly love reached a new level, marked by a more in-depth integration of realism and a bolder challenge to traditional gender roles.

As Chaucer's understanding of Italian literature deepened, he gained a clearer insight into the great gap between the idealized male-female relationship in the tradition of courtly love and the reality of gender relations in medieval society. In this process, although his works still retain the

distinctive marks of courtly love in terms of linguistic style, narrative structure, and plot design, Chaucer profoundly reflects his criticism of medieval patriarchal culture by skillfully reshaping the images of the “noblewoman” and the “knight” culture in the Middle Ages.

Take Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* as an example, he reinterpreted a tale of love and betrayal from the classical period. Historically, numerous poets, including Guido and Boccaccio, have depicted Criseyde, to varying degrees, as a selfish woman who is greedy and treacherous. However, in Chaucer’s writing, Criseyde leaps to life as a complex and multidimensional character, and her tangled and repetitive personality has inspired heated discussions among countless critics (Bisson, 1998:209). Although Chaucer did not change Criseyde’s tragic fate, he endowed her with more delicate emotions and a rich inner world. Bellman argues that Criseyde displays a heroic struggle against fate (Bellman, 2004:314-336), while Damon points out that Chaucer incorporated Christianity into this pagan tale, molding Criseyde into a loyal, compassionate, and broad-minded woman (Damon, 2005).

In the poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus carries on the image of the knight in the tradition of courtly love; despite being a man of great stature in the city of Troy, he falls in love with Criseyde at first sight under the punishment of Eros and willingly becomes her humble knight. However, Criseyde breaks the stereotype of the noblewoman indulging in love affairs in the tradition of courtly love, and she has a clear understanding of the real power relations between the sexes. In the face of Troilus’s advances, Criseyde weighs them thoughtfully and once confesses, “What’s so rare about him liking me? Thank God, I am my own master .....” (Fang:139). This passage fully demonstrates Criseyde’s skepticism about the equality of love between men and women, as well as her strong desire to get rid of male control and pursue a free life.

Chaucer not only reveals the profound conflict between the tradition of courtly love and the patriarchal culture by delicately portraying Criseyde’s psychological activities in this poem, but also expresses his own profound thinking about the fate of women in the patriarchal society by dealing with Criseyde’s betrayal. Unlike those poets who condemn Criseyde, Chaucer chooses to maintain silence and distance, and he uses vague expressions such as “it is written in ancient books” and “I have seen it in other books” to avoid directly judging Criseyde’s behavior. At the same time, he implicitly expresses his sympathy and forgiveness for Criseyde by referring to her as an “unfortunate woman” and by depicting in detail her lamentation and weeping over her fate (249).

Further analysis of Chaucer’s further transformation of the tradition of courtly love reveals its prescience. At a time when most literature was still steeped in the romantic fantasies of courtly love, Chaucer, in an almost rebellious manner, began to explore and challenge these traditional notions. He did not simply adapt or reshape the stories, but gained a deep insight into the social structure and gender power relations behind the ideal of courtly love, and then incorporated a profound reflection on reality into his works. Chaucer’s foresight is reflected in his boldness to reveal the inequalities and constraints that were concealed by gorgeous rhetoric, especially in his treatment of female characters, in which he endowed them with more complex emotions and the ability to think independently, which was undoubtedly a bold attempt at that time. Those women were no longer passive objects, but subjects with their own wills, struggles and choices. Through this kind of innovation, Chaucer not only opened up a new path for literary creation, but also provided the later generations with valuable perspectives for understanding gender, power and social relations, foreshadowing the continuous exploration and pursuit of individual freedom and equality in later literature and social thought.

## **5. The Transcendence and Remodeling of Courtly Love in Chaucer’s later masterpiece—*The Canterbury Tales***

After the profound reflection on courtly love in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and as his life experience

grew, Chaucer developed a deeper understanding of gender and class issues in 14th century England. This understanding is fully reflected in his later masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*. In this work, Chaucer not only transcended the limitations of the courtly love tradition, but also changed the narrators of the stories from courtly poets to middle-class men and women, and the theme was also changed from “love” to “marriage”.

### 5.1 Courtly Love Once More—*The Wife of Bath's Tale*

One of the most representative chapters is *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Discussing the central idea of *the Canterbury Tales*, Michael Masi argued that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* are the key to reading it because “all the stories that precede or follow her are in some sense a response to her argument, or to her account of her own experience, or even to the fact that she became a member of the predominantly male pilgrimage.” (Michael, 2005).

In Chaucer's work, the figure of Wife of Bath vividly presents the image of an independent, self-confident woman. All the behaviors and attitudes of Wife of Bath, both economically and in life, give us a glimpse of modern feminism. Economically, she herself was a capable weaver, belonging to the ranks of the emerging bourgeoisie in England at that time. Not only did she own their own property and were able to be self-sufficient, she was also well-informed and had traveled around the whole world. Such experiences gave her a clear sense of independence and an economic base that was not dependent on men. In addition to diligently running her clothing and fabric business, she acquired a great deal of wealth through five marriages. In her life, Wife of Bath is constant advocates of the equal status of women and men. She denies the moral code set by traditional morality for women and is not willing to play the traditional female role honestly. She boldly questions and denies men's behavior of treating women as subordinates, rises up and dares to fight against her husband who treats her unfairly, and eventually wins and gains dominance.

First of all, in the story, Wife of Bath provokes a profound thought through the sentence “Tell me, who painted the lion?” (Fang:630). She points out that if the history books were written by women, then she is afraid that the sins of the men they write about would be too numerous for all the descendants to pay back. This idea skillfully challenges the prejudices and injustices in a male-dominated society. She alludes to the dominance of men in works of art and the devaluation of women through the contrast between lions and humans (Xiao, 2005:208). Her words are undoubtedly a strong attack on the unfair treatment of women by the patriarchs in society.

Then, at the end of the knight's tale told by Wife of Bath, that King Arthur's knight married his rescuer, an old, ugly and insignificant wife, because he must fulfill his promise. After the marriage, he always sighed and was depressed in the face of such a wife. However, when his wife read his mind, she skillfully posed the question, “Do you want me to be ugly, old and faithful, or do you want me to be dainty and unfaithful?” (Fang:635). After the knight accepted Wife of Bath's counsel and was willing to give her the mastery, the old woman finally transformed into a beautiful and wonderful woman, enabling both to experience marital bliss. This scene is not only an affirmation of the wisdom and courage of Wife of Bath, but also a depiction of Chaucer's ideal state of marriage.

From the perspective of contemporary gender theory, the character of the Wife of Bath shatters the traditional gender norms of the Middle Ages. Her economic independence and audacity to challenge male authority starkly contrast with the subordinate role of women in traditional notion. Chaucer, through the portrayal of this character, not only showcases the rising status of women in society but also launches a scathing critique of the patriarchal oppression of women. This re-evaluation of gender roles reflects Chaucer's forward-thinking beyond his era. He was, in a sense, advocating for gender equality, which was a bold step towards the awakening of gender consciousness. It also offers a fresh perspective for us to understand the gender issues



in medieval literature, prompting us to re-examine the power dynamics between genders in that historical context.

## 5.2 Courtly Love Once More—*The Franklin's Prologue and Tale*

After redefining “nobility” in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* through the marriage of the Knight and the Old Woman, Chaucer explores the significance of “liberty” for marriage and other human relationships in *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale* through the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen. In *the Manciple's Tale*, Chaucer has already provided an initial explanation of the importance of freedom. In this story, the wife of a nobleman, Phoebus, devises a way to cheat on her husband despite the fact that he has provided her with a life of fine food and clothing and has gone to great lengths to make her happy. Chaucer uses the analogy of a “caged bird” to analyze the reasons why the wife of Phoebus betrays her husband: “Take a bird, and put it in a cage, and take care of it, and feed it, and think of all good things for its enjoyment, and make it clean and comfortable, and even if its cage were of gold, and very beautiful, the bird would fain eat its worms, and would rather live its life in a cold and harsh wood. It will always try to run out of its cage; this bird knows nothing in its heart but to be free.”(Fang:720-721).

Unlike the jealous Phoebus, who closely monitors his wife, the marriage between the knight Arveragus and the noblewoman Dorigen in *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale* is based on granting each other the maximum amount of freedom and respect. Arveragus relinquishes his husband's control in the marriage, while Dorigen relinquishes the dominance that the tradition of courtly love affords noblewomen. Franklin commented on this: “It is a demonstration of harmony and mutual concession; what she gets is a submissive attendant, a respectable master — an attendant in love, a husband in marriage; he has to be authoritative, but at the same time he is bound. Bound? —No, he still reigns with authority, for he has gained both a wife and love; his lady, his wife, and a spouse who has received the law of love.”(559-560). While Franklin believes that the marriage between Arveragus and Dorigen is undoubtedly the most humane, it is interesting to note that in his commentary there are references to “Servant” and ‘Master’, ‘Servant’ and ‘Husband’, ‘Love’ and ‘Marriage’, ‘Authority’ and ‘Bondage’ and many other contradictory concepts, thus foreshadowing the possible crises that may arise in the patriarchal society of the marriage of the two, which is built on the tradition of courtly love. After their marriage, Arveragus leaves his wife to seek honor in the martial arts, and Aurelius, a young man, takes the opportunity to reveal his love for Dorigen. As a noblewoman in the tradition of courtly love, Dorigen enjoys the freedom to accept Aurelius's love and drive him to serve her, but this “freedom” brings her to an impasse. In the end, it is only through the nobility of her husband and her suitor's handling of the situation that Dorigen is able to extricate herself from her predicament and realize the incompatibility of courtly love with patriarchal culture.

Though the story is a frustrating one in which Arveragus and Dorigen struggle to balance love and marriage, freedom and bondage, and ideals and realities, it is nonetheless a meaningful tale considering the identity of the freeholder farmer. While most of the male pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* discuss gender relations from a male perspective, Franklin's narrative perspective aligns with Dorigen's in many ways simply because “his social class bears some resemblance to Dorigen's gender class” (Crane, 1994). In the middle and late Middle Ages, with the collapse of the manorial economy and the rise of towns and cities of various sizes, serfdom disappeared and “the disappearance of personal dependence between lords and peasants created an entirely new social culture. There were no longer legally defined boundaries between wealthy peasants and minor nobles and merchants, and social status depended less on the possession of land and more on the occupation and wealth an individual held” (Brown, 2007). In *The Canterbury Tales*, the wealthy Franklin is not only content to have wealth enough to rival the knightly class, but he also chooses to tell a courtly love story to explore such elegant themes as “love,” “nobility,” and “honor” and other elegant themes. Although “his behavior shows that

what he longs for is the responsibility of a knight”(Bertolet, 2013), his story shifts from a celebration of love to an exploration of marriage, while revealing a strong desire to control personal freedom.

The deviation of *The Franklin’s Prologue and Tale* from the tradition of courtly love is undoubtedly closely related to the reality of his situation. Although he is released from his personal dependence on the feudal lords and his economic status is greatly enhanced, his place in the feudal hierarchy of 14th-century England is far less secure than that of his fellow knights. The clash between cultural identity and real status enables Franklin to empathize with the oppressive gender hierarchical culture of the noblewoman Dorigen in the story, while on the other hand, he hopes to express his own questioning of the feudal hierarchical culture through the story of the quest for an ideal “marriage” between Arveragus and Dorigen, and the trials and tribulations that they suffer as a result. Therefore, in Cathy Hume’s view, “the story is not outside its cultural context. The story’s significance depends largely on the connection to real human life and its contribution to the cultural polemics of the time” (Hume, 2012). By choosing Franklin as the narrator, Chaucer perfectly integrates his own attitudes towards gender and class issues into this tale of “love” and “marriage”.

According to class theory, the Franklin, as a representative of the emerging class, his tale in *The Canterbury Tales* mirrors the changes and contradictions within the social class structure of that time. Despite his aspiration for the status and honor similar to that of knights, he still faced difficulties within the feudal hierarchical system. His story’s shift from glorifying love to exploring marriage reveals the disparities in the pursuit of ideal marriages among different classes. It also reflects the emerging class’s doubts and challenges towards the feudal hierarchical culture. Chaucer, through the Franklin’s narrative, deepens his criticism of social class issues in medieval England, highlighting the complex interplay between class, power, and social mobility.

Meanwhile, Chaucer’s humanistic thinking which completely breaks the shackles of feudalism also hints to some extent at his real attitude towards the battle of the sexes in marriage as well as the battle of class in English society. By dissolving the traditional sense of gender and class, he hoped to promote a more egalitarian, liberal and inclusive culture. In such a culture, men and women and individuals of different classes can be free from oppression and prejudice, and enjoy the dignity and happiness they deserve, which is in fact a transcendence and remodeling of the tradition of courtly love.

## 6. Conclusion

In the 14th century, Christian thought still held sway over mainstream society, with its influence on all social classes unquestionable. In the *Genesis*, Eve was created from one of Adam’s ribs, solely to provide him with a companion. This narrative clearly defined the subordinate role of women in society. Secular courtly love, which emerged after challenging the Christian tradition’s polarized view of women, placed them in a new, illusory space—marginal and without real significance. Chaucer, without a doubt, took note of this.

In his poetry, the idea of courtly love evolved through early adaptations, mid-phase integrations and innovations, and later transcendence and reform. It eventually transformed into a “marriage paradigm” that more accurately reflected the social realities of 14th-century England and the emotional dynamics of the emerging middle class: it should be built on respect for individual freedom, equality and humanity. The praise for such ideal marital love can be seen through all Chaucer’s works, from *The Book of the Duchess*, *Troilus and Criseyde* to *The Canterbury Tales*.

As Christopher Brooke aptly summarized, “Chaucer’s works have a deep ambiguity, yet what is unmistakably clear is his expansive vision of love and sexuality.” From his exploration of marriage theme, we can see that though in some aspects Chaucer is still bound to feudal society,

he is ready to break the bondage and embrace the spirit and morality of Renaissance in which love, equality and human freedom are celebrated.

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