Portrayal of Women in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: A Study of Gendered Narratologies in *The Clerk's Tale* Vs. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

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Abstract

This study compares Chaucer's presentation of female characters in two of *The Canterbury Tales*: *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. Through a close reading of *The Clerk's Tale*, this paper discusses how Chaucer represents Griselda as an example of the mainstream male attitudes to women in Chaucer's time. Thereafter, the study discusses how representation of female characters from the male perspective distorts the real persona of women: neither idealized nor wicked creatures as projected by the dominant male thought of that time. Further, this study analyses in detail Chaucer's representation of women in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, focusing on the character of Alison, who is represented as an example of the woman who goes beyond the stereotypical images that the male narrators created about women in Chaucer's other tales.

Keywords: Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Medieval projection of women, Gendered attitudes in literature

1. Introduction

In most of the stories in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the image of women is largely based on the male perspective. Consequently, the portrayal of women is not realistic or natural, but rather, a projection of what is expected of them or as what they are perceived as by men. *The Clerk's Tale* offers one such example. In Chaucer's time, it was considered 'natural' to call women wicked if they had a mind of their own as opposed to what their husbands thought. Derek Brewer (1964) argues (p. 75) that the true and trustworthy women, in the Middle Ages, were the ones who are obedient to their husbands no matter what circumstances they experience together.

He further states that during in the Middle Ages, "[a] wife was completely subordinate to her husband, and had no right to property or to anything else, even to her children" (p. 75). Literature is a portrayal of the society and vice-versa: The image of Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale* is representative of the male-designed archetype of women of the Middle Ages. Not only is she subordinate to the husband-figure, she is also equally resigned to this fate, notwithstanding the suffering that such subordination entails. Yet, the master craftsman that Chaucer is, he portrays women in many different ways even within the span of *The Canterbury Tales.* In contrast to this tale, three of *The Canterbury Tales* have women as their main narrators, including *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which readers get to peep into some of the reality of who women are and not who the male narrators see them as. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the narrator is a woman and this is discernible in the narratology which breaks the female stereotype, that of either a mother or a nun. The narrator, Alison, is not satisfied with the roles imposed on women of her time, and therefore, the presence of her character stands for them and defends their rights. Through a close reading of *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, this paper argues that Chaucer, in a masterstroke, portrays the submissive woman of his time in *The Clerk's Tale,* thus satisfying the prevalent convention, but at the same time, the woman in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is an epitome of reality, also reflecting his opinion of the oppression of women in his time.

2. Literature Review

In many sources, critics have discussed the negative representation of women in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* which portray the world as it was then. However, the researcher has not come across studies that compare Chaucer's negative representation of women in some of his tales with other tales in which he presents women as who they are in reality.

Critics, such as Angela Jane Weisel (1998) in "'Quiting' Eve: Violence against Women in the Canterbury Tales," discuss how The Canterbury Tales reflect the world in which the tales are written. Weisel suggests that the tales show how the world in the Medieval Era considered the woman as a corrupted creature because of the false stereotype propagated by the story of Eve. She discusses how violence against women was considered even necessary and masculine (p. 115-17).

With reference to the tales discussed in this paper, many critics from Henry Hinckley (1917) to Jill Mann (2002) refer to the status of Griselda in The Clerk's Tale as miserable and below the status of a respected wife. Commenting on Griselda's loyalty to her husband,

Hinckley (1917) suggests that she looks more of a servant than a wife (p. 298). Indeed, Mann (2002) goes even beyond that and suggests that Walter has purposefully chosen Griselda as a low-born wife, a thing that grants him more room for dictatorship (p. 116). Griselda's patience is unbelievable, but Denise Baker (1992) describes it as a virtue, not a weakness as other critics have claimed, "in the case of Griselda, fortitude is not her predominant virtue, but the quality which makes possible her exercise of obedience in the face of her husband's severe tests. Patience is only the necessary means for Griselda's extraordinary obedience, a virtue regarded in the Middle Ages as a species of justice" (p. 243).

On the other hand, the status of women in The Wife of Bath's Tale is totally different as the narrator here is a woman, Alison. Chaucer, through the character of Alison, shows woman in different roles and viewpoints regarding women than the ones popular in literary texts of his time. In The Wife of Bath, Alison comes across as an independent person and defends women's rights by expressing her own ideas, not her husbands'. In her prologue, she changes the traditional expressions and ideas to suit her own ultimate goal, granting women right equal to the men of her time the same rights as men. Alison's prologue, as described by Susan Crane (1987), "is based on antifeminist tracts [and] marital satire" (p. 20). Crane (1987) claims that Alison's tale "[confronts] the social belief that feminine power should be strictly limited, and [attempt] to establish a defense of secular women's sovereignty that opposes the conventions available to Alison" (p. 20). Moreover, Mary Carruthers (1994) argues that Alison's experience extends to include "a larger context, the experience of her whole social class" (p. 23).

3. Methodology

This study, through a comparison of the representation of women in *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, sets out to show that, in the former, Chaucer represents the ideals of his contemporary society, and not his own. However, his representation of the main character in The *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Alison, is more realistic and voices his own opinion regarding the oppression of contemporary women. The main instrument of comparison is the narratology, comparing how the male and female narratives differ in their portrayal of women even though they are contemporaries. It may be mentioned here that women in Chaucer's time were accorded a status secondary to men, and therefore, when the author introduces three women out of his twenty-nine pilgrims, many interpretations become plausible (Paduraru, 2018).

Women in the male narratology: *The Clerk's Tale*

In the *Clerk's Tale*, the Middle Ages male perception of the ideal woman is projected in the character of Griselda: An epitome of virtue and submission to her male counterpart, King Walter, existing merely to fulfill his will and wish, not having any of her own. So deep and unquestioning is her being that even when her maternal instincts are threatened in the loss of her children, she does not ask any questions. Before these events transpire, however, the king begins the story by stating that he shall choose his own wife, which one must question the necessity of if there is no prior preference and if all women are expected to be copies of the archetypal. When his lords plead with him to procreate an inheritor to the throne in case he dies, King Walter reverts:

> Lat me alone in chesinge of my wyf,
>
> That charge up-on my bak I wol endure;
>
> But I yow preye, and charge up-on your lyf,
>
> That what wyf that I take, ye me assure
>
> To worshipe hir, whyl that hir lyf may dure,
>
> In word and werk, bothe here and everywhere,
>
> As she an emperoures doghter were. (Chaucer, 1987a, lines 162-68)

Walter, it appears is already bent upon choosing a lower-class wife. This decision is clear when he directs his lords should to "worship" his wife irrespective of her station in the society, "as she an emperoures doghter were" (line 168). This statement is indicative of the presumption that his likely choice of a wife will be found strange to "worship," because if she were a "high-born" woman, the lords would not need to be so ordered. The reason behind his choice of a lower-class wife might be his desire to have absolute freedom to humiliate her in the future. Nevertheless, since King Walter states that he "truste in Goddes bountee, and therefore / [his] mariage and myn estaat and reste / [He] hym bitake; he may doon as hym leste" (lines 159-61), Jill Mann (2002) argues that, in Walter's case, "[his] choice of a low-born wife, which in hindsight we read as allowing Walter more room for dictatorship, appears at this moment – with perfect validity – as a surrender of the self to the divine providence" (p. 116). Although it seems as if Walter has left the decision to providence, which he pretends will choose his wife, at this point, he has in fact already chosen his wife, the "low-born" Griselda.

Against his offer to marry her, Walter asks for her complete and unquestioning obedience from Griselda, such obedience as he asks his lords to owe. Griselda, on her part, is what Walter could have asked for, as she is much too obedient to ask Walter the reason for choosing her as his wife, one of much lower social standing. Obedience, however, is not her only virtue, she is also beautiful and obedient in an equal measure. It will, in fact, not be an exaggeration to say that she is the 'ideal woman' of the medieval times, resplendent with all the qualities that a father (who gives her away in marriage to the king) or husband of that age could ask for, a perfect daughter and a perfect wife. Commenting on Griselda's submission to her father's decision, Henry Hinckley (1917) argues in the context of Griselda's obedient acceptance of the decision taken by her father that "[i]n her own eyes, Griselda is always first and foremost, not a wife, but a serf" (p.

298). Chaucer (1987a) describes Griselda as:

> …fair y-nogh to sighte,
> And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte.
> But for to speke of vertuous 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. (lines 209-14)

Though these lines reflect Griselda's outer beauty, the narrator eventually extols on her inner beauty which is no less, i.e., her "vertuous beautee." Her virtue is all that matters to King Walter is that she is virtuous. The narrator connects her virtuousness and her poverty, suggesting that because she is poor, "[n]o likerous lust was thurgh hir herte y-ronne" (line 214).

Though portrayed as the ideal Christian woman of her time, Griselda's passiveness is beyond the imagination of the modern reader. For instance, completely ignorant of King Walter's reason for demanding to see her, she is terror stricken and can only think of kneeling before him ina show of her complete submission even to the unknown, "And doun upon hir knees she gan to falle, / And with sad contenance kneleth stille / Til she had herd what was the lordes wille" (lines 292-94). Kneeling before the king is the first indication of her passivity and could have been understood in the light of her not knowing the reason for his desire to meet her, but when she does learn of it, her subjugation is shown as extreme when cannot even refuse his order or think about it. Walter says:

> "Grisilde," he seyde, "ye shul wel understonde
> it lyketh to your fader and to me
> That I yow wedde, and eek it may so stonde,
> As I suppose, ye wol that it so be." (lines 344-47)

Walter does not so much as ask Griselda to marry him, it is a command to her to accept the proposal, ruling out any iota of doubt in acceptance, or chance of refusal, expecting obedience and subjugation even before marrying her, setting a routine of thoughtless devotion to his wishes. Walter, in fact, goes to the length of telling her so in words, taking his oppressive diktats as far as they can. He tells her that she should submit to every demand he makes and to be ready to fulfill his needs, whether with pleasure or pain:

> I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
>
> To al my lust, and that I frely may,
>
> As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
>
> And never ye to grucche it, night ne day?
>
> And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
>
> Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
>
> Swere tis, and here I swere oure alliance. (lines 351-57)

King Walter dictates his conditions for their marriage to Griselda, but she does not voice (and perhaps does not possess) any views about her marriage with the King.

When Griselda marries King Walter, he tests her very harshly to make sure of her obedience and total submission to his will. It is difficult to say which of these is the most trying. To begin with, not wanting his court to see the poverty of his new wife, he tells her to come sans clothing or any other possession from her home, a condition which Griselda passively agrees to and follows through, arriving "naked" to be dressed and prepared for her new station by the women of Walter's court. It appears that humiliation more than any other thought is the driving force behind this demand as Griselda marches through the court. As for Walter, he is convinced of Griselda's obedience and submission, well almost, till it is time for the next test. Walter goes on to rob Griselda of any source of happiness presumably under the premise that she exists only for his pleasure and has no right or any pleasure other than pleasing her husband. When a baby girl is born to the couple, Walter takes her away and pretends that she has been sent to her death. An act as cruel as this is sure to break the resolve of the hardest of women, but not so with Griselda who shows her husband nothing more than obedience and submission to his will, regardless of her devastation as a mother:

> She seyde, "Lord, al lyth in youre plesaunce;
> My child and I with hertely obeisaunce
> Ben yores al, and ye mowe save or spille
> Youre owene thing: werketh after youre wille." (lines 501-04)

As we can see in these lines, Griselda positions her child and herself as Walter's possessions. She is totally passive, referring to herself and her child as Walter's "owene thing[s]" (line 504). A repeat performance follows when a little later, a boy is born to Griselda, who also is taken away by Walter with the announcement that he too shall meet the same fate as his earlier born sister. Even this does not elicit anything but submission and compliance from Griselda. Moreover, Walter is not yet done with his tests as even with passing such heartbreaking commands, Griselda has to undergo the ultimate humiliation of her times: Divorce. Walter announces that she has been

divorced by him and that she will return to her father's place so shamed.

In a show of worse humiliation, Walter orders her to return to his palace to ready it to welcome his new wife, to which also she acquiesces with complete and unquestionable obedience. It is by now well established that in her mind she does not see Walter as the King or even her husband, rather she sees him as her "master," as I would prefer to call him in this situation. On being purposely asked by Walter what she thinks about his new wife, she praises the new wife and wishes the two of them a happy life, though she departs from her routine so far by gently reproaching the King to not put her new wife to such tests as he did with her as she may buckle:

O thing biseke I yow and warne also,

That ye ne prikke with no tormentinge

This tendre mayden, as ye han don mo;

For she is fostred in hir norishinge

More tendrely, and, to my supposinge,

She coude nat adversitee endure

As coude a povre fostred creature. (lines 1037-43)

For the modern reader, such submission would appear nothing short of insanity and would elicit little else than contempt for Griselda as well as Walter, because for a woman to compromise on the life of her children is an unthinkable act of madness. But for Griselda, this comes naturally, so non-existent is her Self. When Walter finds out how perfect Griselda is (according to his own standards), he tells her the truth, that he has not, in fact, divorced her, introduces her to their children, and the family reunites.

At the end of *The Clerk's Tale*, the narrator states that the goal behind this story is not submission of women to men, but the upholding of the Christian ideal of total commitment to one's mission in life, which, for Griselda is obedience. She is an ideal Christian woman, whom everyone of her time would be expected to have dreamed of to have as a wife or a daughter. She is beautiful and dedicated to meeting the needs and expectations of her husband, and she is totally submissive to the wills of her father and husband, or in other words, to the male patriarch.

Also, Chaucer portrays the importance of patience and determination as the necessary virtues one must possess to be able to reap the harvest of happiness later in life. However, it must be admitted that despite of the virtues being kept in the forefront here, the portrayal of the ideal woman in this story is also the ambition of the male narrators of that time; and from this it follows that the female narrators, for example in *The Wife of Bath*, are cast in a negative light.

The woman's narratology: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

The narrator in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is a woman, Alison, and this is an exception in *The Canterbury Tales* as most other tales have male narrators, giving the male thought system great flexibility to portray the female characters according to the prevalent or desired social archetypes. Therefore, in having female narrators in *The Wife of Bath* and two other tales, Chaucer seems to have answered an artistic urge to include other viewpoints that may be less popular in his times. In this tale, the narrator Alison has persona all her own with her own ideas about women's rights. In a way, she can be seen as an activist who defends her right to marry more than once because she thinks that the main purpose of the human organs is giving pleasure. Therefore, whenever a husband of hers dies, she gets another and, most strangely, she finds ways to be able to manipulate each other of them.

The protagonist in *The Wife of Bath* is different from her contemporary literary figures as she is neither a mother nor a submissive and obedient wife. On the contrary, she appears as a superior member of society because she is the owner of an estate and also because she shows good knowledge of the Christian scripture. Her narration is also interesting as she molds common ideas and expressions to suit herself, her goal being equal rights for men and women. Alison's prologue, as described by Susan Crane (1987) "is based on antifeminist tracts [and] marital satire" (p. 20). Alison confidently speaks as a well-educated member of the society, which makes her tale "[confront] the social belief that feminine power should be strictly limited, and [attempt] to establish a defense of secular women's sovereignty that opposes the conventions available to Alison" (Crane, 1987, p. 20). Throughout *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, Alison makes references to antifeminist stereotypes and tries to show that she and other women of her time can stand as equals to men in every life aspect.

To validate her argument, Alison begins her prologue by stating that experience in life is what she needs to speak of and the problems and sufferings of marital life:

Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, were right y-nough to me

To speke of wo that is in mariage;

For, lordinges, sith I twelf yeer was of age,

Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,

Housbondes at chirche-dore I have had five. (Chaucer, 1987b, lines 1-6)

She is the owner of her experiences and, thus, she asserts that she has the right to debate based on the conclusions she has gained from her life experience. However, Mary Carruthers (1994) avers that "though [Alison's experience is] obviously referring to the events of her personal life – to her five husbands, her cloth making, her love of travel – the word also includes a larger context, the experience of her whole social class" (p. 23). Building upon this assumption, one can say that Alison's "experience" is symbolic of the experience of the entire female race. The word "experience," as some critics suggest, is the path to exploring Alison's womanhood. To fully understand the central idea of her tale, one needs to know that women despise their being used as objects or personal belongings. Priscilla Martin (1990) states that Alison "vindicates experience against authority and sex against virginity. Both positions imply a defense of the laity against the clergy and so of women against men" (p. 210). The reason why Alison criticizes her patriarchal society is because, in such a society, when women marry, they (and any money and land they own) immediately fall under the control of their husbands.

The differences in Alison's experiences across her four marriages are basically a factor of how and if she was able to manipulate them. Ultimately, though, she can be considered successful because she ends up owning her husbands' wealth and property on their demise, contrary to her earlier objection that marriage for women means loss of control of their selves and their possessions. However, Alison finds true challenge in her fifth husband, because he preferred his books to her, something that was a point of extreme irritation for Alison. This, in a way, makes her lose her power which she earlier exercised on her previous four husbands. Therefore, she finds herself in unfamiliar territory as she couldn't find the handle that helped her manipulate the other husbands. One night, when he was reading one of his favorite books, he continuously read aloud misogynistic stories and proverbs, which Alison could not accept:

> And whan I saugh he wolde never fyne
>
> To reden on this cursed book al night,
>
> Al sodeynly three leves have I plight
>
> Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke,
>
> I with my fist so took him on the cheke,
>
> That in our fyr he fil bakward adoun.
>
> And he up-stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
>
> And with his fist he smoot me on the heed,
>
> That in the floor I lay as I were deed. (Chaucer, 1987b, lines 788-96)

Alison's experience contains concrete actions as much as opinions and stories about her struggle for women's equality to men. When she sees the dangers of being used by men, she gets into action, just as she did to Jankin, her fifth husband. Jankin is without doubt a representative of the male psyche of his times. He purposely reads aloud some stories of:

> …wyves hath he red,
>
> That somme han slayn hir housbondes in hir bed,
>
> And lete hir lechour dighte hir al the night
>
> Whyl that the corps lay in the floor up-right. (lines 765-68)

Like other art forms, literature too is a representation of prevalent life, and Chuacer is no exception. His stories are a reflection of his contemporary viewpoints especially about women, including that they are untrustworthy like killers. This is evident in the stereotypes Jankin cites such as the instances of women who murder their husbands sleep and others "han hem yeve poysoun in hir drinke" (line 771). Moreover, he uses derogatory proverbs, such as the following:

> quod he, "thyn habitacioun
>
> Be with a leoun or a foul dragoun,
>
> Than with a womman usinge for to chyde.
>
> Bet is," quod he, "hye in the roof abyde
>
> Than with an angry wyf doun in the hous;
>
> They been so wikked and contrarious;
>
> They haten that hir housbondes loveth ay."
>
> He seyde, "a womman cast hir shame away,
>
> Whan she cast of hir smok;" and forther-mo,
>
> "A fair womman, but she be chaast also,
>
> Is lyk a gold ring in a sowes nose."
>
> Who wolde wenen, or who wolde suppose
>
> The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne? (lines 775-87)

The inclusion of such popularly held ideas and oft-repeated proverbs that crystallize the societal stereotypes of women, Jankin is a representative of his entire society. For the same reason and due to his derogatory language against women, he can be labelled a mouthpiece of the misogynistic general attitude toward women of the Medieval era. He uses humiliating proverbs, such as stating that he would prefer to "Be with a leoun or a foul dragoun, / Than with a womman usinge for to chide" (lines 775-77) that suggest he trusts women so little that dangerous animals like dragons and lions may be friendlier to live with than a woman. At the same time, he can also be divorced from the views as he is only voicing certain common beliefs, and that may be his salvation. But then, he need not repeat them before his wife. Therefore, it can be argued that Alison's striking him is an act representative of the entire sex's repulsion of such hurtful misogynistic talk, targeted mainly to stop him from talking.

In her prologue, Alison also refers to the commonly held, stereotypical forms of antifeminist perspectives of her time, which accuse women of being skillfully unfaithful. She says, "For half so boldely can ther no man / Swere and lyen as a womman can" (lines 227-28), which, indeed, is confusing because these two lines can be interpreted as more of a confession than a criticism. Thus, one remains doubtful whether Alison means to accept or reject the stereotypes, but clarity is achieved when. Later, she lays out the reasons for the prevalence of anti-women views in her society, prime amongst them being that no woman other than a saint is considered worthy of respect in her times:

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke wel of wyves,
But if it be of holy seintes lyves,
Ne of noon other womman never the mo. (lines 688-91)

The idea behind these lines is that unless a woman be a saint, she cannot be deemed a good person, because the "clerks" do not compliment ordinary "wyves." Equal education is the second issue that Alison brings up as women of her time were deprived of it. As a result, they did not have the means to express their views about men which could have exposed their "wikkednesse", which she argues is so extensive that men cannot even redress it:

> By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than all the mark of Adam may redresse. (lines 693-96)

Lack of opportunity, thus keeps women from showing men's "wikkednesse" in writing. However, Alison seems to be an exception to this as well as she clearly demonstrates such great knowledge about the Scripture and life in general. Her prologue presents her as even more educated than some men, because she uses logic and, as Martin (1990) states, "vindicates experience against authority and sex against virginity. Both positions imply a defense of the laity against the clergy and so of women against men" (p. 210). This argument is countered however, by saying that when she speaks, it is as the representative of the larger, suppressed, uneducated lot of her gender. Although she and a few other women had the chance to be educated, millions of women did not have the chance even to learn how to read or write. Thus, Alison represents them in a way that they cannot do themselves.

3. Conclusion

Most of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* represent women according to the dominant male perspective of his time. With a few exceptions, these tales do not portray the real women of the times, but the desirable ideals or if they fail to be ideal, women as inherently wicked creatures, i.e., the stereotypical views held by men of the era. For example, Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale* is an epitome of the ideal woman of Chaucer's time, resplendent as she is with the high virtues of obedience and submission to the male patriarchs who govern her life. However, her character is unrealistic because she undergoes and passes such inhuman tests as go against the grain of womanly character such as not reacting even when her children are snatched from her and presumably sent ot their deaths, or preparing her husband's house for his new wife. Such tribulations are impossible for a person to easily undergo and remain sane, in fact, they may be called 'unnatural'. Chaucer's portrayal of Griselda in such a submissive role is representative of the dominant social thought. By the end of the tale, the narrator clarifies that the aim is not to have women emulate Griselda, yet, her image remains the ideal that men of her society would love to see reflected in their wives and daughter, which means that Chaucer, in this tale, reflects the mainstream point of view regarding women.

In contrast, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* is an example of the narratological variation where women are the narrators, breaking female stereotypes and challenging the inequality of the patriarchal society. In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, the role of Alison is that of flagbearer for the women of her time, demanding and defending their rights. Nabi (2017) rightly notes that *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* have been chosen by Chaucer to portray a hypocritical situation, offering women of all times some advice between the lines: Feminism may help women in some situations but in others, it may rather harm them. A similar sentiment is echoed by McTaggart (2012) who says that while claiming freedom for herself and other women in marriage, Chaucer's narrator in this tale does so by virtue of the "autocritee" granted them by anti-feminism. Chaucer's creation of the female characters like Alison in *The Wife of Bath's Tale,* like his other characters, is truly a reflection of his society, however minuscule and insignificant this may be in real life. He allows her to flaunt her knowledge and as the harbinger of hope for the women of her times, all of which were certainly not the dominant social features but were perhaps, ideals of great writers like him.

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