



Gender and Language in Chaucer's Literature

What can a linguistic approach to Chaucer's poetry reveal about medieval literary constructions of gender?

INTRODUCTION



My thesis examines presentations of gender in Chaucer's language through a stylistic analysis of gender-based noun terms (e.g. 'housbonde', 'lady', 'sire', 'wyf' etc) that occur throughout his work. This study is distinctive in that it combines analytical methods from both literary and linguistic disciplines, to contribute to critical discussion of Chaucer's presentation of gender.

Throughout the thesis I address how Chaucer represents gender through his language and whether or not his presentations relate to the socio-cultural views of fourteenth century England. Such examination will also allow me to determine if a linguistic approach supports or refutes the traditional perception of gender in Chaucer, as established in previous literary studies (Cox, Tuttle Hansen).



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How does Chaucer represent gender through his literary language?
- 2) How do his presentations relate to the socio-cultural views of fourteenth century England (simple reflection, critique, comic inversion etc)?
- 3) Does an analysis of this use of language support or refute previous literary theories in this field of research?



IMPACT



My thesis addresses the wider issue of how literary language study can help the modern reader understand medieval writer's applications of language patterns and the intended effect of this on reader's attitudes to gender. More generally, the thesis addresses questions on:

- 1) How English language and literature may reflect, interpret or challenge socio-cultural attitudes towards gender.
- 2) How language reveals that past cultural viewpoints may have influenced those of today.

This research offers insights into the historical basis for how gender terms are used and develop in English and thus is of relevance to non-academics and academics with an interest in the areas of social and linguistic change as well as literary study.

References:

Cox, Catherine S. *Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Gainesville, University of Florida, 1997)
Hansen, Elaine Tuttle, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (California: University of California Press, 1992)
Simpson, John and others, eds, *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) < <http://dictionary.oed.com>>

METHODOLOGY



The texts and terms chosen for analysis have been selected through a **corpus-based** methodology that reveals which narratives are particularly concerned with or unique in their presentation of gender language, including: An ABC, The Book of the Duchess, Troilus and Criseyde and The Canterbury Tales.

To identify words and phrases for analysis, MonoConcPro is used to determine frequent **collocations** and idiomatic phraseology.

Corpus

The body of written or spoken material upon which a linguistic analysis is based.

Collocation

The habitual juxtaposition or association in the sentences of a language, of a particular word with other particular words.

... wys. 1266And certainly, as sooth as God is kyng. 1267To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng. 1268And namely when a ...
... a wyf the fruyt of his tresor. 1270Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir. 1271On which he myghte engendren ...
... good and hath doon many a day. 1304And if thou take a wyf unto thyn hood. 1305Ful lightly maystow been a cokewold. ...
... it than woot my page. 1444For whiche causes man sholde take a wyf. 1445If he ne may nat lyven chaast his lyl, ...
... corage 1513Of any man that stapen is in age 1514To take a yong wyf; by my fader kyn. 1515Youre herte hangeth on ...
... 1529I warne yow wel, it is no childes play 1530To take a wyf withouten avysement. 1531Men moste enquire, this is myn assent, ...
... yif he may. 173His libertee this brid desireth ay. 174Lat take a cat and fostre hym wel with milk 175And tendre flessh, ...

This linguistic approach allows for a systematic choice of gender terminology for analysis, preventing unsupported assumptions on the lexis, a factor that has been problematic in previous studies on Chaucer's language.

The most frequent use of 'wyf' in *The Canterbury Tales*

	Total Occurrences	Overall Use in Canterbury Tales	Line Length of Tale
Merchant's Tale	60	18%	1227
Wife of Bath's Tale	43	13%	1264
Clerk's Tale	38	11%	1162
Parson's Tale	25	7%	1080
Shipman's Tale	24	7%	452

A semantic and pragmatic analysis is then carried out on the terms, with the aid of lexicographical resources (i.e. the Oxford English Dictionary online, the Middle English Dictionary online and the Historical Thesaurus of the OED), to determine what contextual factors effect their usage (e.g. speaker? status? genre, such as romance or fabliau?) and how if this corresponds or conflicts with socio-cultural views of the medieval period, and established critique on gender and Chaucer today.

FINDINGS



Analysis so far has revealed that some aspects of Chaucer's gender terms do correspond with the expected socio-cultural ideals of the medieval era, such as the tension between the 'trewe' and 'wikked' wife, whilst others are more unexpected, such as comic use of 'sire' as a mode of mocking in the 'Merchant's Tale'. However, the study demonstrates Chaucer's clear distinction between the presentation of particular statuses and actions in varying contexts, showing his awareness of his gender constructions. For example, a cruel or detached husband is deemed a 'wedded man' to semantically distinguish them from one in partnership and, thus, correlative to 'wyf'. Moreover, characters may alter their terminology based on status, social expectation, or the space they occupy, be it private or public. A factor that is becoming clear throughout all of Chaucer's work is that the semantic nuances within his language are heavily influenced or restricted by the genre of the piece, suggesting that his later, less stylised narratives allow for greater interpretation of the language.



The use of gender terminology in private and public spaces in the 'Franklin's Tale'

