JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE STUDIES | ISSN: 2148-4066
Journal of Narrative and Language Studies – June 2022, Volume 10 – Issue 19

The Medieval Borderline Identities: The Guildsmen in History and in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

Nazan Yıldız
Karadeniz Technical University
nazanyildiz1@hotmail.com

APA Citation:
Yıldız, N. (2022). The Medieval borderline identities: The Guildsmen in history and in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, *10*(19), 83-97.

Abstract

This study reads the guildsmen of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) as the members of the medieval borderline community generated by social mobility which induced the emergence of a "middle-grouping" having new identities out of the accredited individualities of the traditional three estates. Medieval society is notorious for its hierarchical structure owing to feudalism and severe estate divisions; that is, the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. Medieval people, led by faith, assumed that this division in society was directed by the Creator for the prosperity of the community. However, the drastic financial, societal, and governmental fluctuations of the late fourteenth century, to be exact, the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, devastated this unbending structure of feudal realm. Those changes brought about the waning of feudalism and a wide-ranging social mobility which gradually formed a "middle-grouping", made up mainly of the social climbers of common origin. The medieval people of the "middle-grouping" could not possess a recognisable ground for themselves in the medieval structure; hence, tried to find an acceptable identity on the borders of the three estates. Furthermore, the social climbers of the "middle-grouping" aped the lifestyle of the nobility, especially their attire, to be accepted into their sphere, which was almost impossible in the medieval context. In other words, the medieval people of the "middle-grouping" grew into Others along with the assortment of the traits of the commoners and the nobility, yet recognised by none of them. Notable members of the "middle-grouping" were the guildsmen of the time who are presented by Chaucer in *the Canterbury Tales* only in eighteen lines and simply treated as pretentious upstarts by scholars, ignoring their identity crisis. Accordingly, my aim, drawing on their historical counterparts and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of borderline community and mimicry, is to depict the guildsmen of Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* as the medieval people of borderline identities, or Others, stemming from the middle-grouping, who establish their marginal selfhoods on the confines of the approved identities of the three medieval estates.

Keywords: *The Canterbury Tales*, the Guildsmen, Homi K. Bhabha, borderline identities, medieval middle-grouping, otherness

1. Introduction

The Middle Ages is known for its harsh estate classifications; namely, the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners, which defined the identity boundaries of medieval people. In the *Middle English Dictionary*, "estate" is defined as "[s]ocial or religious status or standing […] the status or position of a member of a monastic order; […] the condition or status of being a layman; […] with reference to wealth: financial condition or status; […] preserve or safeguard one's possessions or standing" (2019, "Estāt," def. II.9). Copious critics have underscored the significance of estate in the Middle Ages. Mortimer, to exemplify, points out that according to medieval people, the three estates, those who pray, those who fight, and those who work, were formed by God. The clergy was responsible for praying for the entire society. The duty of the nobility was to guard the clergy and the nobility. The commoners were to work and produce food for the clergy and the nobility (2009, p. 40). The three estate structure was in accordance with feudalism, the golden chain bonding medieval people, and put forward that everyone should accept the estate they belonged to as they were fated by God. If people behaved appropriately to their estate, society would function best (Bisson, 1998, p. 143). That is, as discussed by Whittle and Rigby, society, to medieval people, should be made up of diverse groups dependent on each other to perform certain tasks for the good of the whole society (1987, pp. 67-68). Literature of the time contributed to people's perception of the three estate structure, too. For instance, in his *Vox Clamantis* (*The Voice of One Crying*), John Gower states that society consists of three estates under which people serve the society (1962, p. 116). Thus, in the same direction as religion, the literature of the period brought the concept of estate to the forefront as the most central element of the Middle Ages. Needless to say, the way of thinking and life of medieval people were moulded by those estates, which assigned certain roles and their concomitant identities to everyone.[1]

By the fourteenth century, however, the authority of the three estates was damaged due to the social transformation owing to the social, political, and economic conditions of the time, mainly the Hundred Years War between England and France, 1337-1453, the Black Death of 1348-9, and the Peasant Revolt of 1381 which debilitated feudalism and three estates structure. That is how, as specified by Childress, the categorized construction of the society founded on vassalage and estate model "showed a good many cracks" (2000, p. 3). Consequently, the margins amongst the people of three estates were distorted because of the ascending mobility of the commoners creating a "middle-grouping"[2] whose members cannot be entirely included in any of the three estates. In other words, as I argue, medieval society created Others within itself rather than the Saracens and the Jews who are largely treated as the monstrous Others in medieval literature. In this context, the "traumatic otherness" (2003, p. 5) suggested by Cohen for medieval Others is also applicable to those of the middle-grouping. In fact, in the convoluted realm of the fourteenth century, this traumatic otherness was at the heart of medieval identity. In point of fact, examining the studies on Otherness in the Middle Ages, including those on *the Canterbury Tales*, there appear bountiful studies focusing on medieval world and postcolonialism: the emergence of self and other, the East and West, the Orient and the Occident, and "Us and Them" dichotomy.[3] These studies mostly have centred on religious and

[1] In the introduction part of this article, I have drawn on the introduction chapter of my dissertation "Hybridity in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: Reconstructing the Estate Boundaries" (2015) which is available on http://www.openaccess.hacettepe.edu.tr:8080

[2] The medieval people who could not be included in any of the three estates (the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners) are widely treated as the exemplars of "the middle-grouping" "strata" or "class" as in Bishop (1971, p.308),Strohm(1989,pp.4-5)andTurner(2006,pp.29-30).

[3] On the Otherness in the Middle Ages and the delineation of the Other in *The Canterbury Tales*, see, among others, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996) 3-25; Albrecht Classen, *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle*

cultural identities such as those on the Jews and the Saracens. Different from these studies analysing the Other on racial and religious grounds, I aim to scrutinize medieval guildsmen as Others of borderline identities since they are the most conspicuous members of the middle-grouping.[4]

2. The Medieval Middle-Grouping: Unwelcome Identities

Looking at the origin of the medieval middle-grouping, the commoners come to the forefront. The calamitous plagues of 1348, 1361, and 1369 decreased the number of commoners and brought about the labour shortage so that the commoners could ask for higher wages, Knapp notes (1990, p. 12). Therefore, the growing cash economy necessitated specific professions and distorted the well-accepted divisions between the estates (Knapp, 1990, p. 12). To put it another way, owing to the money-based economy together with banking, investing and lending, there emerged different positions and professions apart from the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners such as artisans, bureaucrats, and tradesmen. Towns and guilds were at the heart of the money-based economy. Guilds were unions where people doing the same job get together such as craftsmen doing metalworking and weaving or commercial men engaging in spices or textiles. Guilds grew into essential components of towns, possessed momentous social status, and controlled industry and trade in towns, purchasing, selling, and supervising principles (Swanson, 2000, p. 402; Mortimer, 2009, p. 94). Recapitulating the situation of guildsmen, Higgs states that "troubling numbers of craftsmen, in the post-plague world of labour shortage and increased wages, were beginning both to dress and to pitch their political ambitions above their traditional station" (1982, p. 164). That is to say, the commoners- including guildsmen gaining wealth- created a kind of middle-grouping different from the third estates and demanded social position, scornful of feudalism and three estates structure. In a similar vein, Bishop notes that the residents of towns acquired the prerogative of "self-government", replacing "a money economy for one based on land", which paved the way for the rise of the middle-class, full of pride, prosperous, active and scornful of the realm ruled by feudalism (1971, p. 178).

Thereby, the stern precincts amongst the members of the three estates were distorted since social climbing enfeebled the severe division between the commoners (labourers) and the nobility (lawmakers). As the rank of the commoners upgraded, they even became active in politics. Their interaction with the aristocracy and increasing importance on the public ladder led to their mimicry of the privileged classes, especially of their attire as imitation usually begins with clothing (Keen, 1990, p. 11). Similarly, to Scott, in the Middle Ages "[p]eople judged you by your clothing" referring to your character and social status (2004, p. 5). Hughes, likewise, claims that medieval social climbers pounding at the door of the aristocracy tried to get in (1988, p. 81). Thus, the affiliates of the middle-grouping aped the fashionable clothing of the nobility to gain reputation, authority, status, and more importantly an identity in the society. Clothing, a major display of an individual's position in society, was principally crucial in a society with diverse orders, medieval people; then, were supposed to dress conforming to their status in the social pyramid. For that reason, in the fourteenth century, clothing indicated grandeur and

Ages (New York: Routledge, 2002); Kenneth Bleeth, "Orientalism and the Critical History of the Squire's Tale." *Chaucer's Cultural Geography*. Ed. Kathryn Lynch (New York: Routledge, 2002) 21-31; and Khalid Mosleh Alrasheed, "The Postcolonial Middle Ages: A Present Past." MA Thesis, University of Wyoming, 2009.

[4] See among others, Suzanne Conklin Akbari (2000) "From Due East to True North: Orientalism and Orientation" in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages,* edited by J. Jerome Cohen. New York: St. Martin's Press; Kenneth Bleeth (2002) "Orientalism and the Critical History of the Squire's Tale" in *Chaucer's Cultural Geography,* Edited by Kathryn Lynch. New York: Routledge; Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (2009) *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of the Middle Ages Outside Europe (Rethinking Theory).* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

power, and nearly ten per cent of the revenue of nobles was consumed on apparel which designated the prominence of apparel amid the nobility. Bright colours, silks, jewels, gold, and silver indicated status, hence, were qualified for the nobility (Howard, 1987, p. 47). However, gaining wealth and wearing ostentatious clothing, the unacknowledged members of the middle-grouping claimed their standing and identity in feudal society, which was intolerable under the authority of the nobility. As remarked by Mortimer, townsmen and women were even imitating the nobility with regard to taking bath, a lavish and noble ritual (2009, p. 197). In his *The Regiment of Princes*, Thomas Hoccleve criticizes the people imitating their superiors in the Middle Ages as such:

> Nay, soothly, sone, it is al mis, me thynkith,
> So poore a wight his lord to countrefete
> In his array; in my conceit it stynkith.
> Certes to blame been the lordes grete,
> If that I durste seyn, that hir men lete
> Usurpe swich a lordly apparaille;
> It is nat worth, my chyld, withouten faille. (1999, pp. 435-441)

Hoccleve noticeably decries the commoners to imitate the clothing of the nobles and he was not alone in this. In his "Ship of Fools" (1494), Sebastian Brant condemns medieval social climbers violating the confines of vassalage and the three estates, and asserted nobility irrespective of their common descent: "From noblemen they claim to stem/The while their father banged and pounded/[…]/Now he would claim his blood is blue/ As if no man his father knew/His name was Master Jack of Mayence, /The while his son is Squire Vincenz" (1944, p. 252). The poem of Brant plainly shows the unacceptable status of social climbers in the medieval society, transferring them into Others, using Staszak's words for Others, "whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group" (2008, p. 1). Needless to say, the in-group mainly consisted of the nobility in medieval context. Guildsmen were among those Others who "met with resistance from the general citizenry, who feared the possibility of unfair privilege from the Crown" (Smith, 2012, p. 64). With their roots in the commoners, guildsmen were especially not welcomed by the nobility. Tuchman remarks that "[n]othing was more resented by the hereditary nobles than the imitation of their clothes and manners by the upstarts" (1978, p. 19). In like manner, Strohm notes that the conservative medieval society did not acknowledge "middle" or other principal classifications which could distort the fixed partition of social ranks. Then, there were the commoners as the inferiors and the nobility as the superiors (1989, pp. 2-3). Via the sumptuary laws, nobles endeavoured to thwart social climbers. The sumptuary laws of 1336 and 1363 were mainly designed to forbid the commoners from dressing similar to nobles and eating lavish foods. For example, pursuant to the laws, the people earning £100 per year were eligible for wearing furs. Many of the townspeople such as traders' wives broke the rules and put on arrogantly their ermine and miniver which brought forth the widening of the sumptuary laws in 1363 to stop the people who broke the laws on clothing. Gold was legitimately exclusive to the nobility and knights, and their wives were eligible for ermine and pearl (Tuchman, 1978, p. 20; Childress, 2000, pp. 31, 45). That is how as an exclusive group, the nobility tried to keep the commoners at the bottom of society through different statues and sumptuary laws. In a nutshell, despite the tremendous social transformation, in the three estates structure of medieval society, there was not a fixed and recognisable place for those of the middle-grouping who rose on the social scale. Therefore, as Mortimer highlights, most of the medieval people in the fourteenth century such as traders and attorneys could not find a room in the three estates (2009, p. 52). The major division concerning class was still grounded on the concept of gentility which was the chief criterion of the period to distinguish the nobility from social climbers. Gentility was considered as the focal

connection attaching medieval people belonging to the nobility together (Keen, 1990, p. 12; Brewer, 1992, p.18). Henceforth, gentility was the biggest hindrance for social climbers to be acknowledged in the circle of the nobility. Consequently, the nobility did not accept the members of the middle-grouping into their sphere which rendered those belonging to the middle-grouping Others. In other words, recognised by neither their previous estate, the commoners, nor by the nobility, the estate they aspired to, the fellows of the middle-grouping turned into Others.

Sharing a similar social transformation as the trigger, the impasse of medieval social climbers might be associated with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of borderline community. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha examines borderline identities, who are caught in between diverse communities. Highlighting the borders as the places of both parting and unification, Bhabha claims that they contain copious clashes and dilemmas (1994, p. 1). Border, according to Bhabha, is "an in-between site of transition: the beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past [. . .] [which] produce[s] complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1994, p. 1). Furthermore, for Bhabha, "[t]he in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular or communal– that initiate new signs of identity" [. . .] which defines "the idea of society itself" (1994, p. 1). Therefore, Bhabha defines those new identities, accepted as Others, as the members of a "borderline community" (1994, p. 12). In the Bhabhanian sense, medieval social climbers possessed borderline identities in between the circles of the commoners and the nobility since they embraced the characteristics of both their former estate, the commoners, and the estate they wanted to be included, the nobility, and had to live on the confines of these two estates with, in Bhabhanian terms, their "partial presence" (1994, p. 86).

In treating the portrait of the guildsmen as a depiction of the medieval borderline identities, another Bhabhanian concept, "mimicry" might be also useful. In the postcolonial context, mimicry, for Bhabha, is a means for the colonised to fight back the coloniser (1994, p. 91). Mimicry, as defined by Bhabha, is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 86). Similarly, for Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, mimicry indicates the uncertain bond between the coloniser and the colonised. The colonised mimic the coloniser, "their cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values" (Ashcroft et al., 1998, p. 139). It is not the perfect copying of the characteristics of the coloniser, but a "blurred copy", a threatening one. Therefore, mimicry creates a peril to the superiority of the coloniser over the colonised (Ashcroft et al., p. 139). Then, to Bhabha, mimicry is "at once resemblance and menace" which renders the colonised having a "partial" or "incomplete presence" (1994, p. 86). Equally, to Boehmer, mimicry is an "imperfect copying" (1995, p. 69) of the values of the coloniser to resist the colonial authority, yet it also designates the dilemma of the colonised. Similar to their colonial counterparts, medieval people of borderline identities, imitating their superiors, the nobility, tried to acquire "recognisable" identities, yet they become "almost the same, but not quite", lack of gentility. Similar to colonial Others, mimicry becomes a weapon for medieval Others to challenge the authority of the nobility. In the medieval context, mimicry as a defence could function well since the upper-classes did not accept any mark of sameness between themselves and those of the middle-grouping. Then, analogous to colonial Others, through mimicry medieval Others grow into "imperfect copies" of the nobility which increased their identity crisis. Therefore, my intention is to extend the Bhabhanian concept of borderline community and mimicry to the medieval context and consider Chaucer's guildsmen in *the Canterbury Tales*, medieval members of the middle-grouping, as examples of borderline identities, or Others living on the thresholds of the acknowledged medieval identities shaped by the three estates, especially by the commoners and the nobility.

3. The Medieval People of Borderline Identities: Guildsmen in History

Before analysing Chaucer's guildsmen as the Others of the Middle Ages, it seems appropriate to take a brief look at the historical portrayals of the characters. To begin with a haberdasher, in Chaucer's time, in the late fourteenth century, haberdashers were dealing with selling men's clothing and accessories such as hats, ties, and gloves (Lambdin, 1996, p. 145). They were also associated with the dominant Drapers guilds dealing mainly with cloth and dry goods (McCutchan, 1959, p. 315) and with the mercers engaging in textiles (Garbaty, 1960, p. 693). By 1372, the guild of haberdashers earned more esteem and dignity as they declared their first ordinances, took two seats in the Common Council, and formed a Haberdasher's Court (Garbaty, 1960, pp. 703-704). Occupying those high positions along with political influence, haberdashers coveted the lifestyles of nobles. With the number of apprentices increasing day by day, haberdashers increased their reputation in society, asking for an identity in the complicated realm of the fourteenth century. Another guild group asking for recognition in medieval society was carpenters. As in the example of the Herland family, Hugh Herland, the King's Carpenter from 1375 to 1405, the social position of carpenters was rising in the late fourteenth century. Carpenters were also responsible for building private residences around England (Washerman and Guirdy, 1996, p. 154). As Salzman highlights, the master carpenter of Ely, in 1323, "was provided furs worth 4s4d as part of his salary, a sign of respect and an indication of his rising status" (1952, p. 47). Owing to their increasing wealth and rise in status, carpenters became the leading figures of the aspiring middle-class having no place in the three estates. That is to say, a master carpenter of the late fourteenth century such as Lawrence Wright, neither upstanding to take part in the gentry nor so ordinary to be a commoner, became an Other with his minority identity in three estate identities in the majority. Weavers belonged to those minority identities, too. Although weavers were not as powerful as merchants, the wealthiest and prevailing guild of the time, they still characterized a trade symbolizing the social and economic transformation of medieval England, Morgan states (1996, p. 170). In the late Middle Ages, England was at the forefront in wool trade and cloth making in Europe which put weaving at the centre of the English economy. Throughout the Middle Ages, wool kept its position as the most significant English export to an extent that the domination in wool trade was one of the main causes of the Hundred Years' War against France. To foreground the social position and economic and political power of weavers, Morgan points out, "the weavers' guild and its position among the other guilds led, finally, to social and political changes so dramatic that the tripartite society of medieval England crumbled under their pressure" (1996, p.172). Morgan further defines weavers as the "first true urban proletariats" (1996, p. 175) which again signifies their vague position resultant the waning of the three estates in the late fourteenth century. Morgan encapsulates the "partial presence" of the guildsmen via his words on medieval weavers:

A laborer in the capitalist system responsible for the new power and wealth of the urban middle class, the weaver nonetheless resided in the countryside where the effects of the reversal were most felt. He thus seems to have been, rightly or wrongly, at once associated with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the uprisings of the 1440s, as well as with the successful urban middle-class entrepreneurs feared and resented by the older aristocracy. (1996, p. 175)

Another group of guildsmen whose social status was obscure owing to the waning of feudalism and three estates were dyers. Rather than rough woolen cloth, the demonstration of wealth through gorgeously dyed clothing was the major sign of status in the Middle Ages. Dyeing required the skill in chemistry and artistry along with hard labour. The London Dyer's Guild was founded with ordinances in 1188, and in the fourteenth century, dyers were paid higher than regular wages. A dyer might also serve the king or the nobility (Uhlman, 1996, p. 185). Like other social climbers, a dyer of the fourteenth century might rise on the social ladder

through marriage, for instance, into a prestigious merchant family. As pinpointed by Uhlman, "[t]he ultimate goal for the scions of such families was the step into the aristocracy itself" (1996, p. 187). Uhlman further gives an account of the life of a dyer, William de Pappesworth, a social climber gaining wealth and status in society. William de Pappesworth began his career as an apprentice to a dyer in London. In thirteen years, he was selected as an alderman. According to his will, he possessed a large estate in Cambridgeshire and gained money from rents in London. Uhlman also likens the Pappesworth family to the Chaucer family in that Chaucer's family living in Ipswich was importing wine and serving the king as customs officials for three generations. The family acquired a social and financial status similar to a family of an upper middle class and stood at the door of the nobility (1996, p. 188). Yet, the acceptance by the nobility especially by those of the highest ranks was almost impossible which, like in the case of weavers, brought about the unrest undertaken by the guildsmen who felt frustrated because of the obstacles to higher wages and future prospects. Geoffrey Litester (Dyer) was among those aspirant guildsmen. He was one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 like Wat Tyler and demanded his rights and status and finally was hung for his headship (Uhlman, 1996, p. 188).

The final member of Chaucer's guildsmen is a tapestry maker. Tapestry-making is a kind of weaving. To Candee, tapestry makers were higher on the social ladder than weavers (1935, p. 5). Dating back to the third century, tapestry-making is an ancient craft of the Far East, the Middle East, Egypt, India, and Peru (Stephens, 1996, p. 192). Tapestries might demonstrate an important historical happening or a biblical or mythological story. In the Middle Ages, tapestries came to be valuable and striking household furnishings that indicated wealth and social status. Viale remarks, "[t]o own a tapestry was a sign of wealth, grandeur and power; and on public occasions, they were displayed ostentatiously as evidence of their owner's social importance" (1996, p. 24). Tapestry even became so important that the term developed into a synonym for dowry, making its owners covetable brides (Stephens, 1996, p. 194). This valuable profession brought wealth to its owners who demanded a recognisable identity on the medieval social scale. Ülgen accentuates the significance of the guilds in Medieval Europe as such:

The guilds were the key constructions to trade and industrial life in Medieval Europe. The guilds, which initially emerged as opposing formations, were united in time as a single movement, including the concepts of legal authority and voluntary union. With the establishment of the guilds, the rights of producers and consumers were protected, and a new era began in business life with the cultivation and sale of quality products. (2013, p. 471)

To sum up, the shared point of those guildsmen was that they were all social climbers of common origin with considerable wealth and members of the middle-grouping, who were not accepted either by the commoners or by the nobility designating their status as Others. Another shared fact about those Others was that they tried to gain identity and status by means of imitating the nobility, manifesting itself especially in their apparels and yearning for display which caused Hughes to describe the late Middle Ages as the age of imitation (1998, p. 81). Embodying status and power, clothing was the main means of guildsmen to claim their position on the social ladder. As the rising members of a new class, they violated the confines of the three estates and tried to surpass the nobility. In Von Boehn's words, "a prosperous townsman had more reason and opportunity to display wealth through dress than did his noble countrymen who were not at court" (1932, p. 216). Von Boehn adds,

[i]n the arrogance of its newly acquired wealth the rising middle class recognized no bounds, it must and would enjoy life. It did not desire to emulate the knights, but to outshine them. This aim naturally manifested itself most obviously in dress, for dress is the agency through which any new consciousness of the world and one's particular milieu is most speedily proclaimed. (1932, p. 215)

Guildsmen started to wear "long sleeves purfiled, or bordered, with fur, their shoes piked (or peaked), their girdles and purses and their hair cut and curled" (Settle, 1946, p. 16). Thus, they, disrupting the borders of the nobility, began to dress like them and terrorized the nobles. As clothing grew into more and more an emblem of status, the sumptuary laws, as aforementioned, were issued in 1363 to underline the class distinction (Thrupp, 1962, 147-148). Yet, as guildsmen turned into a very significant part of the rising middle-class no longer dependent on the manor, they retained dressing like the nobility, proud of their wealth, and the attempts to regulate attire failed. It did not mean, however, that they were accepted by medieval society. The Peasants Revolt of 1381, as stated in the case of weavers and dyers, was the most momentous ground where the medieval Others claimed their identity in the medieval society. Besides peasants appealed for their rights and freedom, the rebels comprised the social climbers, who earned prosperity and asserted social status owing to the changing social, economic and political conditions of the late fourteenth century. Mainly, social climbers of the middle-grouping, like guildsmen, millers, franklins or reeves, objected to still being considered as serfs by the nobility. Similarly, the revolt, claimed by McKısack "owed much of its impetus to men who were rising in the world and striving to be free from archaic restrictions" (1959, p. 342). That is how guildsmen, free-born but of common birth, turned out to be Others of the Middle Ages as they did not entirely fit in the traditional three estates and possessed borderline identities on the margins of the recognised identities of the three estates, without attaining a complete recognition with any of them.

4. The Portrait of the Guildsmen in *the Canterbury Tales* as a Reflection of Medieval Borderline Identities

Geoffrey Chaucer's (1340-43?-1400) *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) is largely recognised as a matchless depiction of fourteenth-century English society. *The Canterbury Tales* delineates the members of borderline community as the fruits of the social change and mobility of the period, which, as aforementioned, generated a middle-grouping or Others not completely involved in any of the traditional three estates. Among these figures of the middle-grouping, I will examine the guildsmen- a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, and a tapestry maker-whom Chaucer did not assign a tale and described only in *the General Prologue*. As Lindahl points out, Chaucer incorporated the guildsmen in his masterpiece since they symbolised the recently emerging middle class (1987, p. 21) or as I name "the middle-grouping", an in-between group of medieval Others. As discussed in the historical portrayal of guildsmen, guildsmen belonged to the emerging new class having wealth but not a certain place in the traditional three estates and accordingly demanded a status and identity in medieval society. Then, guildsmen were living, in the Bhabhanian sense, on the borders, on "an in-between site of transition" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1) between the territories of the commoners and the nobility. Then, in the formation of Otherness, classifying people into two hierarchical groups as "them and us" (Stazsak, 2008, p.2), guildsmen were the inevitable members of the group of "them" while the nobility is of the group of "us". Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, an estate satire and a frame-tale, depicts the tensions of the late fourteenth society between the old order, feudalism, and three estates, and the new order, emerging capitalism, and middle-grouping. Within this chaos, the text presents medieval borderline identities such as guildsmen along with the main figures of the three estates: The Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman.[5] Written in a

[5] In relation to Chaucer's treatment of the "middle-grouping" in *the Canterbury Tales*, medievalists might be divided into two groups as the one alleging that Chaucer is devoted to the three estate model, and the other claiming that Chaucer is on the side of the social climbers as he is one of them. Supporting the second view,

time of social transformation when the old order was dying and a new order was established, the masterpiece reflects the aspirant guildsmen in search for a recognisable identity, similar to their historical counterparts, via social display and imitation of the nobility. Presented only in lines between 361-78, accompanied by their own Cook, the portrait of the guildsmen has received little scholarly attention. Their cook was even paid more attention than they did. Most of the studies have focused on the type of the guild of these townsmen, Chaucer's reason for selecting the specific crafts, and even the rationale for their presence in *the Canterbury Tales*. Yet, as I claim, the significance of the portrait of the guildsmen lies elsewhere in that this short passage says more about the late Middle Ages than it seems by providing a picture of medieval Others. Within the eighteen lines in *the General Prologue* to *the Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer presents his guildsmen as a group:

An HABERDASSHERE and a CARPENTER,
A WEBBE, a DYERE, and a TAPYCER,
And they were clothed alle in o lyveree,
Of a solempne and greet fraternitee.
Ful fressh and newe hir geere apiked was;
Hir knyves were chaped noght with bras
But al with silver; wroght ful clene and weel
Hire girdles and hir pouches everydeel.
Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys
To sitten in a yeldehalle on a deys.
Everich, for the wisdom that he kan,
Was shaply for to been an alderman.
For catel hadde they ynogh and rente,
And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente;
And elles certeyn were they to blame.
It is ful fair to been ycleped "*madame*,"
And goon to vigilies al bifore,
And have a mantel roialliche ybore. (1957, lines 361-78)[6]

To Gastle, the portrait of the guildsmen becomes a puzzle for scholars since they do not have any tales not allowing character development (1998, p. 214). Kirby asserts that it is even impossible to comprehend and appreciate the portrait completely (1938, p. 504). However, this short portrait still pictures the identity crisis of guildsmen, the nouveau riche members of the society: "An Haberdasshere and a Carpenter, A Webbe, a Dyere, and a Tapycer" (1957, lines 361-62), who are, in Higgs's words, "self-conscious about their newly attained status" (1982, p. 164). In *the General Prologue*, the guildsmen, despite having different crafts, wear the same livery showing them "belonging to a social (religious or parish) guild rather than a craft or merchant guild" (Higgs, 1982, p. 164): "And they were clothed alle in o lyveree,/Of a solempne and greet fraternitee." (1957, lines 363-64). Similar to their historical counterparts, they are full of aspirations mainly indicated in their stylish clothing which is "ful fressh and newe" (1957, line 365). Their livery "with its soft, smooth texture, its deeply dyed, true colours, and its rich sheen" (Uhlman, 1996, p. 81) indicates their richness. Knowing that clothing is an indicator of status, the guildsmen put on their trendy clothes and try to prove their significance in society. Their accessories are also in line with this splendor: "Hir knyves were chaped noght with bras/But al with silver; wroght ful clene and weel/Hire ~~girdles and hir pouches every~~deel."

similar to his Franklin in *the Canterbury Tales*, in his ballade "Gentilesse", Chaucer explains the essence of gentility and affirms that pure nobility is based on noble demeanours not on noble lineage.

[6] All references to *the Canterbury Tales* will be to F. N. Robinson Edition along with the line numbers.

(1957, lines 366-68). Their striking girdles and pouches are keeping up with this sumptuous display, too. Erol states that girdles and pouches were the most stylish objects of the medieval period and continues: "It would not be far-fetched to assume the girdles to be no simple ones made of linen. Their array is designed to arouse the effect desired […]. They seemed as important as a mayor who customarily sat on the platform higher than the others" (1981, p. 104); and their outfit designates "their obsession in their self-importance" (Erol, 1981, p. 106). Moreover, their knives are embellished not with bronze but silver just like the nobles despite the fact that "wearing knives or pouches with embellished silver" was forbidden for the guildsmen through a law issued in 1363 (Higgs, 1982, p. 164). The fashionable dress has been a gauge of social change. Yet, it corresponded to new and unacceptable identities in medieval context, in Bhabha's terms, producing "complex figures of difference and identity" (1994, p. 1). As the narrator highlights, the guildsmen look like the distinguished representatives of their profession; thus, they deserve to give a speech on the podium: "Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys/To sitten in a yeldehalle on a deys." (1957, lines 369-70). Yet, later, the narrator summarizes why these guildsmen's possessing an acceptable status analogous to the nobility seems impossible by declaring that if appearance and work were enough, they each would be selected an alderman: "Everich, for the wisdom that he kan,/Was shaply for to been an alderman." (1957, lines 371-72). For Gastle, these are ironical statements through which Chaucer criticizes the "petty bourgeois pretensions to political power" (1998, p. 215). In a similar sense, to Harwood, Chaucer's guildsmen have a slim chance to be selected as aldermen since their historical counterparts were not in the companies called in 1351 to select the Common Council unlike merchants, grocers, vintners, fishmongers, drapers, skinners, and tailors who were the possible candidates to be the aldermen of London (1988, p. 414). The term "alderman" suggests a significant social status as it refers to "the head officer of a guild" or "the head of a borough, village, estate, or monastery" (Fullerton, 1946, p. 523). More than pretensions, these are the positions that the guildsmen are longing for to be able to claim their status in society. However, as the narrator states, their wealth and splendid clothes in the imitation of the nobility are not sufficient to acquire those positions and accordingly social status as they lack gentility. Then, mimicry, making use of Bhabha's words, analogous to their postcolonial counterparts, negatively contributes to their "partial presence", making them "almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 86) although they are employing it to become a "recognizable Other" (1994, p. 86). That is to say, their financial rising on the social scale is not enough for the guildsmen to be acknowledged by the circles of the nobility. The guildsmen, having no place in the nobility, have no place in the spheres of the commoners, their previous estate, either, which signifies a traumatic Otherness for them.

This traumatic Otherness, possibly more than their husbands, is also applicable to the wives of the guildsmen who think that all their property is wasted and dream of their husbands' being selected an alderman: "For catel hadde they ynogh and rente,/And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente;" (1957, lines 372-74). Thus, it is natural for them to be offended and they want to be called "madame" as they deserve: "And elles certeyn were they to blame./It is ful fair to been ycleped "*madame*,"" (1957, lines 375-76). Another sign of status, the wives, with their luxurious clothes in a manner of a queen, also want to be the first to enter the church just like another very well-known aspirant character of *the Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath: "And goon to vigilies al bifore,/And have a mantel roialliche ybore" (1957, lines 377-78). Appertaining to the social aspirations of the wives, Higgs states that "[t]he wives aspire to process in public on religious feasts with […] fine robes whose conspicuously superfluous trains were carried, in courtly fashion, by servants" (1982, p. 164). In the same manner, as accentuated by Erol, "[a]ccording to medieval deportment, only ladies of noble birth had women-in waiting who were also of noble birth and carried the ladies' trains and overcoats" (1981, p. 106). In a word, similar to their husbands, the dress becomes the index of social aspiration for the wives.

With their desire to be called "madame", to be treated nobly, and wearing above their status, the wives search for upper social mobility and covet the lifestyle of the nobility. The wives of the guildsmen are not alone in claiming a place in the nobility by overpassing the boundaries in clothing in *the Canterbury Tales*. Alisoun of *the Miller's Tale* is another wife of a guildsman, who envies the noble life. She is the young wife of a well-off, old social climber who is a carpenter. A common birth with aspirations, Alisoun follows the fashion of the nobility and wears silk, which is forbidden to her: "Hir fillet brood of silk, and set ful hye," (1957, line 3243). Her girdle is of the most luxurious silks of the time: "A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk" (1957, line 3235) with a purse, again a lavish one embellished with pearls. Yet, Erol states that "the pearls are imitation and they are made of latoun, parallel to her fake gentility" (1981, p. 141). Alisoun, then, is the perfect example of a "blurred copy" (1998, p. 139), in Ashcroft's words, of the nobility. Her shoes are also trendy: "Her shoes were laced on her legges hye" (1957, line 3267). Alisoun takes her place in the middle-grouping as the aspirant wife of a wealthy carpenter who lacks noble birth.

5. Conclusion

The short delineation of the guildsmen in *the General Prologue* to *the Canterbury Tales* reflects the estate-conscious but unsteady societal and monetary arrangement of late medieval England. The guildsmen with their wives assert the lesser orders of the nobility through their wealth. Chaucer's guildsmen stand for the great social transformation in the late Middle Ages, giving birth to the development of a middle-grouping not included in any of the accepted identities of the three estates. Similarly, unlike many of the characters presented in *the Canterbury Tales*, such as the Monk, The Knight, or the Wife of Bath, the guildsmen do not have individual identities, but are treated as a group. Acknowledged as a threat to the traditional social order by crossing estate boundaries and violating the deep-rooted privileges of the nobility, the guildsmen, lacking gentle birth, occupied a contradictory social position between commoners and nobles. Claiming their identity in medieval society by imitating nobles, similar to mimics of Bhabha, especially in clothing, the guildsmen are amongst the medieval Others, not accepted into the realm of the nobility, and exemplars of medieval borderline identities living on the margins of the nobility and the commoners. Then, despite the social transformation in the late fourteenth century, medieval society was still a society of superiors and inferiors, or "Us" and "Them", where there was no recognised place for the in-betweens in the fixed identifications.

Furthermore, as I have tried to discuss throughout the paper, the portrait of the guildsmen in *the Canterbury Tales*, found enigmatic, lacking distinct voice, and simply treated as the portrait of pretentious social upstarts, paints more than it seems within the eighteen lines. Along with the clash between the old and new social order, the portrait depicts the medieval borderline existences, or Others claiming a recognisable identity in society. Caught in the middle between nobles and commoners, Chaucer's guildsmen are the representatives of the real borderline identities on literary grounds out of the pen of a writer belonging to the middle-grouping himself. As a final remark, since the guildsmen do not have tales in *the Canterbury Tales* to provide us with more material in relation to their Otherness, *the Franklin's Tale*, another medieval Other's story, might be read to have more insights into the Otherness of the medieval middle-grouping. In his tale, the Franklin[7], the wealthy landowner of common birth, tells of a

[7] The Franklin is the character mostly identified with Chaucer himself and I discussed him as one of the hybrid characters of *the Canterbury Tales* along with the Knight, The Monk, the Prioress, and the Miller in my dissertation.

romance focusing on the significance of the gentility of deeds rather than the gentility of birth which sheds light on the plight of medieval Others.

References

Akbari, S. C. (2000). From due east to true north: Orientalism and orientation. In J. Jerome Cohen (Ed.) *The postcolonial Middle Ages* (pp. 19-34). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Alrasheed, K. M. (2009). The postcolonial middle ages: A present past (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Wyoming, Laramie.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1998). *Key concepts in post- colonial studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.

Bishop, M. (1971). *The penguin book of the Middle Ages*. Norwich: Fletcher and Son.

Bisson, L. M. (1998). *Chaucer and the late Medieval world*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Bleeth, K. (2002). Orientalism and the critical history of the Squire's Tale. In Kathryn Lynch (Ed.) *Chaucer's cultural geography* (pp. 21-31). New York: Routledge.

Boehmer, E. (1995). *Colonial and postcolonial literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brant, S. (1944). *The ship of fools*. Translated by Edwin H. Zeydel. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Brewer, D. (1992). *Chaucer and his world*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer.

Candee, H. C. (1935). *The tapestry book.* New York: Tudor Publishing.

Chaucer, G. (1957). *The complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. F. N. Robinson (Ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Childress, D. (2000). *Chaucer's England*. Connecticut: Linnets Books.

Classen, A. (2002). *Meeting the foreign in the middle ages*. New York: Routledge.

Cohen, J. J. (2003). *Medieval identity machines (Medieval cultures)*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Cohen, J. J. (1996). Monster culture (Seven theses). In J. Cohen (Ed.) *Monster theory: Reading culture* (pp. 3-25). Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Davis, K., & Altschul, N. (2009). *Medievalisms in the postcolonial world: The idea of the Middle Ages outside Europe (Rethinking Theory)*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Erol, B. (1981). "A Pageant of Well-dressed People: A Study of Chaucer's Costume Imagery in the *Canterbury Tales.*" Dissertation. Ankara: Hacettepe University.

Fullerton, A. (1946). The five craftsmen. *Modern Language Notes* 61 (8), 515-523.

Garbaty, T. J. (1960). Chaucer's guildsmen and their fraternitee. *JEGP* 59, 691-704.

Gastle, B. W. (1998). Chaucer's sharply guildsmen and mercantile pretensions. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 99 (2), 211-216

Gower, J. (1962). *Vox Clamantis*. *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*. Translated by E. W. Stockton. Seattle: Washington University Press.

Harwood, B. J. (1988). The fraternitee of Chaucer's guildsmen. *The Review of English Studies* 39 (155), 413-417.

Higgs, E. D. (1982). The old order and the newe world in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 45 (2), 155-173.

Hoccleve, T. (1999). *The regiment of princes*. Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications.

Howard, D. R. (1987). *Chaucer and the Medieval world*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Hughes, G. (1988). Gold and iron: Semantic change and social change in Chaucer's Prologue.

In Harold Bloom (Ed.) *Geoffrey Chaucer's The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (pp. 73-84). New York: Chelsea House Publishers.

Keen, M. (1990). *English society in the later Middle Ages 1348-1500*. London: Penguin.

Kirby, T. (1938). The haberdasher and his companions. *MLN* 53, 504- 505.

Knapp, P. (1990). *Chaucer and the social contest*. New York and London: Routledge.

Lambdin, L. C., & Lambdin, R. T. (1996). An haberdasher. In Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin

(Eds.) *Chaucer's pilgrims: An historical guide to the pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales* (pp.145-153). Westport: Praeger.

Lindahl, C. (1987). *Earnest games: Folkloric patterns in the Canterbury Tales.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

McCutchan, J. W. (1959). A solempne and a greet fraternitee. *PMLA* 74, 313-317.

McKisack, M. (1959). *The fourteenth century: 1307- 1399*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

Middle English Dictionary (2019). "Estāt." Accessed May 3, 2022. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english dictionary/dictionary/MED14519.

Morgan, G. (1996). A webbe. In Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin (Eds.) *Chaucer's pilgrims: An historical guide to the pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales* (pp. 170-179). Westport: Praeger.

Mortimer, I. (2009). *The time traveler's guide to Medieval England: A handbook for visitors to the fourteenth century*. New York: Touchstone.

Salzman, L. F. (1952). *Building in England down to 1540.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Scott, M. (2004). *Medieval clothing and costumes: Displaying wealth and class in Medieval Times*. New York: The Rosen Publishing.

Settle, A. (1946). *English fashion.* London: Colling.

Smith, A. (2012). Migrancy, hybridity, and postcolonial literary studies. In Neil Lazarus (Ed.) *The Cambridge companion to postcolonial literary studies* (pp. 241-261). Cambridge University Press.

Staszak, F. (2008). Other/ otherness. In Audrey Kobayaşi (Ed.) *International encyclopaedia of human geography* (pp.1-7). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Stephens, R. (1996). And a tapycer. In Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin (Eds.) *Chaucer's pilgrims: An historical guide to the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales* (pp. 192-199). Westport: Praeger.

Strohm, P. (1989). *Social Chaucer*. Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Swanson, R. (2000). Social structures. In Peter Brown (Ed.) *A companion to Chaucer* (pp. 347-413). Oxford: Blackwell.

Thrupp, S. L. (1962). *The merchant class of Medieval London: 1300-1500.* Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks.

Tuchman, B. W. (1978). *A distant mirror: The calamitous 14th century*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Turner, M. (2006). Politics and London life. In Corinne Saunders (Ed.). *A concise companion to Chaucer* (pp. 29-30). Oxford: Blackwell.

Uhlman, D. R. (1996). A dyere. In Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin (Eds.) *Chaucer's pilgrims: An historical guide to the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales* (pp. 180-191). Westport: Praeger.

Ülgen, P. (2013). Geç Ortaçağ Avrupasında lonca teşkilatı. *History Studies* 5 (2), 472-487.

Washerman, J. N., & Guirdy, M. (1996). And a carpenter. In Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin (Eds.). *Chaucer's pilgrims: An historical guide to the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales* (pp. 154-169). Westport: Praeger.

Whittle, J., & Rigby, S. H. (1987). England popular politics and social conflict. In T. H. Aston (Ed.). *Landlords, peasants and politics in Medieval England* (pp. 65-86). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Viale, M. (1966). *Tapestries.* London: Paul Hamlyn.

Von Boehn, M. (1971). *Mode and manners.* New York: Benjamin Blom.