Answering of two questions

Literature

In Arthurian legends, women were treated as social constructs rather than as individualized personas with real human emotion. Because the tales are meant to convey the codes of chivalry from the Middle Ages, at a time when women were viewed as property in the worst cases, and inferior in the best, women are given extremely limited roles. Often they serve as provocateurs or as sounding-boards for men's use as those men play out their own agendas. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, for example, there are three women portrayed, each of whom represents a kind of stereotypical foil for Gawain to weigh his own actions and decisions against. Guinevere is characterized as a passive persona who has no real will of her own. The Lady is characterized as a having a weak will of another kind, that of infidelity to her marriage vows. She serves merely as seductress for Gawain to reject as he follows his moral code. Finally, Morgana le Fay is presented as a manipulative sorceress who has very little connection to the story other than to operate behind the scenes. None of these three women are presented as real humans. Worse, within the context of the romantic legend, they are treated as standing outside the code of highest action that the story is meant to depict. The women are presented to suggest that they are not capable of experiencing the high ideals of the era because they are incapable of experiencing the emotional and intellectual depth that drove Gawain to seek his principles even in the face of his terrible trials. The women are characters to be overcome, obstacles in the way.

While the legend of Gawain provides more room for analysis of the stereotyping of women than other tales, such as Le Morte D'Arthur, the story is by no means alone in its view of women. Guinevere in particular, as well of other ladies of the court appear in the stories largely to mete out praise or

rebuke to men who are performing thoughtful and heroic actions. While such women reflect traditional feminism that emphasizes purity and adoration, they show little room for change or growth, in stark contrast to the men in the tales.

Chaucer, in the Canterbury Tales, offers many insights into the medieval world, but perhaps none as important as the description of social rank. During the time he wrote, the societal roles that people played were highly defined and clearly separated by birth into a given societal role and level. The society was ruled by royalty and the aristocracy at the top of the society and run by peasants at the bottom. Priests, merchants, and soldiers all played various roles in the social hierarchy, to maintain order. The levels of authority within society were not to be trifled with, and people were expected to know their places and to operate within them. If they stepped outside of their social rank, they could be punished. In Chaucer's own case, for example, he was born to a family of a successful wine merchant, which meant that he must not be critical of higher authorities, such as royalty or the Church or else his own wealth and rank could be damaged. However, he clearly felt an affinity with the common man. As a way to speak to power without directly confronting it, therefore, he wrote about social rank in The Prologue in such a way that the crowd of pilgrims was made up of many different individuals, but no one higher than the rank of knight was portrayed. The knight is offered as the highest authority in the story and the plowman is characterized as the lowest ranking member of the group. When Chaucer presents his characters to show what they thought, he seems to suggest that there were more similarities than differences among the pilgrims, but by removing the royalty from the mix, and treading lightly

around the topic of religious creed, he shows himself to be mindful of social rank and codes of societal behavior even as he gently criticizes them through allegory.

The portrayal of social rank by Chaucer suggests that the basic humanity that was exhibited by all people is what makes them special rather than the accidental place of the birth. Still, despite this, he clearly felt the weight of his own social place and was careful not to transgress it.