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DOCTORAL THESIS

Reflection of the English medieval society in literature. Age of Chaucer

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The present study enrolls in an interdisciplinary sphere, combining two areas of analysis: history and medieval literature. Its primary intention is to combine the analytical instruments of the two disciplines to recover a more complex image of a late English Middle Ages, consumed by political, social, economic and cultural tensions and to restore the circuit of literary studies, neglected artistic creations or wrongly classified. The cooperation between the two areas of analysis didn't involve occupancy of "the other", but a methodological familiarization between the two disciplines, doubled by the ability to select the techniques and the most accurate work notions. Our investigations objective targets the restitution of the image of English medieval society, especially from the XIVth century, as it was perceived and reflected by the literature at that time, especially in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer. English medieval literature is studied as an historical source, as witness and mirror of the society that it reflects, coming to complete and complement, by shades, the historical knowledge, and to diversify the monolithic traditional image of the Middle Ages.

The study is structured in six main chapters, each chapter containing a number of sub chapters. The first two chapters serve to a contextualization of the politic, economic, social and cultural scenario of Medieval England, and the other four chapters follow applied analysis on the medieval literary texts.

The first chapter, **Medieval England**, is built on the intersection of three dimensions: England's political landscape beginning with the reign of Eduard I, the urbanization and political changes of the XIV century and the social relationships structure from this period. Subchapter **State, war and internal turmoil during the three Edwards** follows the reigns of the three Edwards in the context of the external wars with Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and also the tense relationships between the three kings and the barons. Also, this subchapter probes the upcoming and development of the Parliament, and the dynamics between financial pressures of wars and the development of a royal management device. The second subchapter, **Urbanization and**

economic change in the XIV century analyses the emerging and development of medieval English towns, the economic and social dislocations that occur in this context of urbanization. Our analysis is focused upon three functions that shaped the urban identity: the economic function, political-administrative and cultural diversity. Also the emphasis of the analysis falls on the crafts separation from the economic unit of the feudal seniority, causing procedure and exchange processes development and the change of seigniorial administrative functions. Another analyzed aspect is the Black Death impact upon the economic structures and mutations in the social sector. The third subchapter, **The structure of the social relationships** questions the descriptive schemes of the medieval society, the way they appear in the historic medieval documents, in the form of different patterns, but which share the same concepts of subordination and hierarchy. In this stage of analysis is captured the emergence of new types of references to medieval society, by including a new social class, the middle one, of the bourgeois, merchants or craftsmen. The changes of these social patterns reflect the unsacred of the feudatory relationships and their replacement with relationships based on contracts, profit and individual gain. These three subchapters try to enhance the image on an English medieval world in which feudal values are transformed under the pressure of economic change and political ambitions specific to the leading class, a kneaded world, which searches for new sources of legitimacy, for the construction of new social and cultural identity. These mutations of values will be reflected in literature, integrated into the process of legitimacy.

The second chapter, **Literature and medieval society**, studies and structures the relationship between English medieval society, especially the position of writers like John Gower, William Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer towards the political and cultural environment which shape their texts. Concepts of textual authority are interrogated in this chapter, author or *auctoritas*. Also, there are presented Geoffrey Chaucer's biographic elements to demonstrate his implication within the community and the other writers' role as partisans to the ideology and ideological conflict constructions of the end of the XIV century. Chaucer's artistic activity is being analyzed as a space of mediation between social ideals and historical reality, between authority and experience, anchored in the community's debates, in which he lived and served in the name of the common good, a concept extensively circulated by medieval political theories and transferred into the artistic space. Subchapter **Audience** investigates the auditory and medieval audience concept and also the transition from a culture predominantly oral to a written

culture. This sub chapter analyzes Chaucerian texts from the perspective between poet and public relationships or circles of audiences specific to the royal courts under the patronage which the poets activated in.

The next four chapters follow the reflection of some figures and emblematic concepts of medieval society in Chaucer's texts. The third chapter is dedicated to the **King**, a central figure of medieval society, both equally respected and controversial. **Subchapter Richard the II and the monarchy crisis in *The Story of the Clerk of Oxford*** follows in parallel the kneaded reign of king Richard, the lack of heirs, the frequent clashes between the king and tycoons, his two marriages and the reflection of these problems and situation in the story adaptation of Griselda which The Clerk of Oxford narrates. Chaucer's most original work, *The Canterbury Tales*, represents, because of the character and story diversity, a place of concept debating, mentalities, theories or medieval structures and an occupancy of reality. On the same note of overlapping history with literature it is enrolled subchapter **Defamation in Ricardian policies and in the *House of Fame***, which follows the concepts of defamation and high treason which was a constant concern for the political elite in the Ricardian rule period and reflects in the poem *House of Fame* through allegorical figures. Parliamentary statuses, petitions, ordinances that question the concept of defamation are analyzed with literary texts that question the same concepts and disputes.

One of the most controversial figures in the Middle Ages is the **Merchant**, a representative figure for the new social and economic order. Five subchapters are included in this fourth chapter that debate and analyze the mercantile mentality emerging along with the development of the cities, trade expansion and the improvement of a financial system. Contradictory positions that have marked the course of this new mentality are analyzed in subchapter **Mercantilism and anti-mercantilism in the Middle Ages**, where the theologian and Church's position are marked in this debate, and also the antique debates upon profit concepts, trade, commerce or money. A more particular analysis is presented in subchapter **Medieval London**, an example of social and economic transformation, an urban space where the aristocratic elements are combined with the mercantile ones, the interests of the great seniors and mercantile elite, royal and bourgeois policies. Mental mechanisms associated to mercantilism, the space, time or work rationalization attitude, the interest in maximizing profits, the familiarity

with financial transactions didn't represent only the privilege of the mercantile class, the nobility and the Church being at the same time involved in commercial activities. Medieval London represents a formicary of valuable feudal and medieval intersections, symbol of cultural diversity and of as new mentality precursor of the great industrial cities. The third subchapter **Mercantile ideology in The Prologue of *The Canterbury Tale*** projects the previously studied elements in literary, in this case analyzing the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, where we can observe a micro world of English medieval society, with an accent on the middle class. The characters reflect through their features and occupations this mentality based on profit, money, trade and commerce. Most characters represent the interests of the middle class, being connected to a new audience that had access to literary text. Our analysis shows the wave of anticlericalism present in medieval society as a consequence upon the perverting of sacred values and accuses of corruption and luxury towards ecclesiastical bodies. The intertwining of mercantile and aristocratic values within social relationships is followed in *The Shipman's Tale*. The story enrolls in a frame of violation upon the loyalty oath between husband and wife, and also between two comrades blinded by profit and easy earnings. The degradation of relationships is also followed in this environment of transactions and commerce centered on other values than the sacred. The last subchapter, *Storytellers of Canterbury and forms of medieval association* brings together the "guilds" with the literary "association" of Chaucerian characters. The resemblance of the two instances is argued from several point of views, among which sharing of concepts as coherence, strategies regarding the elimination of rebellion, free choices, festivities, internal regulation or keeping a pre-set order.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to **The Knight**, a captive character of an noble idealist, but confronted by many social antagonisms. Two subchapters support this chapter: **Ideal and decline. Chaucer's Knight and his retinue** that follows a history of the chivalrousness concept intertwined by the analysis of three Chauceriane characters: The Knight, The Esquire, The Archer. The portrets of these three characters show the tensions within this noble class, subjected to economic and political transformations of the XIV century, imprisoned by a forced conduit and by istoric realities often oppressive. The second subchapter, **Medieval political theories and The Knight's Tale** follows the reflection of some concepts of the political medieval theories as the principles of a good government, oaths of allegiaence, trialed by battle in *The Knight's Tale*. Elements of the tale are put in a relationship with instances of historical events, like nobles

lawsuits, disputes of the knights or contractual agreements between them. Historical events intertwine with literary texts, meant to underline its meaning and to „confuse” the modern reader.

The last chapter is dedicated to the medieval **Woman**, a controversial character, same as the ones above. The chapter has three subchapters, the first one being available for a more general study of the place of women in medieval society, followed by a study of the Chaucerian feminism, and then an analysis of the *The Wife of Bath*, as a representative of the feminine middle class, a symbol of the social dislocation of the XIV century. The first two subchapters contain problems like marriage, the women status, noble women, sexist manifests of the male literature. The dual feminine identity is also analyzed within the literary texts, that come to underline or to rule against the official ideology. The last subchapter debates the concept of sovereignty within marriage, concept debated by the Chaucerian feminine character. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* represents a manifest against the patriarchal authorities and against the sexist literature disseminated by some theologians and by church representatives who argued the inferior position of a woman in the relationship with a man.

The present study, suggested as a PhD thesis tried to discover, analyze and recover the image of some English medieval society elements, the way they penetrated the literary texts. The two disciplines own instruments, history and literature, were combined in order to bring closer to the modern reader a world so far away from his universe, but close because of the meditation and controversial subjects.