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PHYSICAL AND ATTITUDINAL METAMORPHOSES
^{^1}
IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Lynn Mowry

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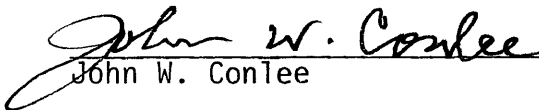
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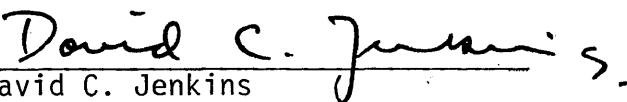
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ABSTRACT

Although the conversion of the Loathly Lady into a young and beautiful woman is the most obvious metamorphosis occurring in the Wife of Bath's Tale, a series of transformations actually take place in the course of the story. A second and perhaps even more important transformation concerns the Knight, who changes from a rapist to a considerate husband willing to give his wife sovereignty if she wants it. The Knight's wife also undergoes an important attitudinal metamorphosis that reflects and parallels her physical transformation. Thus she changes from a woman who is quite capable of having sovereignty over her husband through deceit, to a woman who deals openly with him in an effort to win his love.

Despite the fact that the Wife's Tale shares with its analogues the motifs of the Hag's transformation and the Knight's quest, in none of the analogues does metamorphosis emerge as an integral thematic element. In the analogues the knights, who are noble and honest at the beginning of the tales, neither change in attitude nor learn anything of value as a result of their experiences with their respective hags. Moreover, the hags, who are all victims of jealous stepmothers, undergo only physical metamorphoses. Because Chaucer's Knight and Hag are characters who do change in attitude, Chaucer has created a tale that is far richer and more complex than its analogues.

Like so many of Chaucer's pilgrims, the Wife of Bath does not seem to be fully aware of all that her tale implies. She tells her story to illustrate her belief that a woman should have sovereignty in marriage. Thus she fails to recognize that mutual love and respect are the basis for the marital happiness experienced by the Knight and his wife. Moreover, she fails to see that in her own marital experiences, which she has freely discussed with the other pilgrims in her Prologue, her obtaining sovereignty did not lead to a lasting happiness for any of her husbands or for herself.

PHYSICAL AND ATTITUDINAL METAMORPHOSES
IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

INTRODUCTION

Although physical metamorphoses figure prominently in many of the classical myths and Celtic tales known to Chaucer, they rarely occur in Chaucer's works. Two exceptions to this general rule, however, come to mind. One is Chaucer's Manciple's Tale concerning the transformation of the telltale bird, a story derived in part from an episode in Ovid's Metamorphoses. The other exception is the Wife of Bath's Tale, the major work in the Chaucer canon involving physical metamorphosis, which operates in the Wife's Tale in both obvious and subtle ways.

The Wife of Bath's Tale actually depicts a series of transformations. The most obvious transformation in the Wife's Tale involves the physical metamorphosis of the Loathly Lady into a young and beautiful woman. A second and perhaps even more important transformation concerns the Knight. As Joseph P. Roppolo has pointed out in the article "The Converted Knight in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" ¹ the Knight is changed in the course of the story from a rapist to a considerate husband willing to give his wife sovereignty if she wants it. Moreover, I believe, the Knight is not the only character whose attitude is changed by the events in the story. The Loathly Lady, who by the

end of the tale has become the Knight's wife, also undergoes an important attitudinal metamorphosis when she learns that she cannot win the love of her husband through deceit. Thus her physical transformation reflects and parallels her attitudinal conversion— from a woman who is quite capable of having sovereignty over a man through trickery, to a woman who deals honestly and openly with her husband in an effort to win his love. Furthermore, even the Wife's digression on King Midas may be interpreted within the general theme of husband and wife relationships in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and the Wife of Bath's Tale.

To illustrate her point that women cannot keep secrets, in the course of her story the Wife tells about King Midas, whose ears became those of an ass because he preferred the music of Pan to the music of Apollo. Chaucer borrows this story from Ovid, but he adapts it to suit the Wife's purposes. Whereas in Ovid's version it is the barber to whom Midas foolishly reveals the secret of his ears, in the Wife's version Midas imprudently trusts his wife with the secret. Although the Wife relates this story mainly to illustrate her point that women cannot keep secrets, perhaps Midas deserves the ears of an ass not only because he has misjudged Apollo's music but also because he trusts an untrustworthy wife. Midas has been very stupid not to realize that his wife cannot keep a secret, and his stupidity is thus reflected in an appropriate part of his anatomy, since love has made him deaf to his

wife's loose tongue. Had he realized his wife's need to gossip, he would not have trusted her with such an important secret.

As seems to be true in Midas' case, it is possible that the physical characteristics of the Loathly Lady may also seem to reveal aspects of her character. It is my contention here that within the broad theme of metamorphosis with which the tale is concerned, a more subtle change of attitude occurs in the Knight's wife because she learns something important from the Knight's reactions to her manipulations. When she is a hag she uses her intelligence to deceive the Knight into marrying her. Her actions are as ugly as her form. However, the Hag comes to understand that it is not enough to trick a man into marriage. On their wedding night the Knight ignores his bride because she is old, ugly, poor, and of low birth. Although in her speech on gentillesse the Hag chides her husband for placing greater value upon youth, beauty, and riches than upon chastity and "gentil deedes," she has said that she could amend their unhappy situation; and at the end of her pillow lecture she promises to "fulfille [his] worldly² appetit."

Despite her willingness to use her magic to become young and beautiful for her husband, she cannot resist testing him to see if he has learned anything from her speech. Therefore, she gives him the following choice:

Chese now, ' quod she, 'oon of thise thynges

tweye:

To han me foul and old til that I deye,
 And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
 And nevere yow displese in al my lyf;
 Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
 And take youre aventure of the repair
 That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
 Or in som oother place, may wel be.'
 (ll. 1219-1226)

The Knight's answer to his wife reflects another aspect of the metamorphosis pattern. Although he does not undergo a physical metamorphosis, the Knight has, apparently, undergone an attitudinal metamorphosis. Rather than making the choice himself, he considers the alternatives and decides to allow his wife to choose "which may be moost plesance / And moost honour" (ll. 1232-1233) to both of them. Thus in the course of the story he has been converted from an impulsive rapist to a considerate husband willing to forego his own desires in favor of his wife's wishes and good judgment. As his reward his bride decides to be beautiful to please him and faithful because she values honor and has convinced her husband that honor is important.

Following the pillow lecture, the conversation that occurs between the Knight and his wife seems to suggest that they have both been transformed from selfish, deceitful creatures into two lovers who genuinely care about each other's happiness. Although the Knight is willing to give up his rightful sovereignty to his wife, there may even be a suggestion in the language of this passage that the young bride chooses not to retain that sovereignty throughout

their marriage but returns it to her husband in exchange for his love.

The Wife of Bath, however, like so many of Chaucer's pilgrims, does not seem to be fully aware of all that her tale implies. Although she tells her story to illustrate her contention that a woman should have sovereignty in marriage, she fails to recognize herself that mutual love and respect provide a more stable basis for marital happiness. Moreover, she fails to see that in her own marital experiences, which she has freely discussed with the other pilgrims in her Prologue, her struggle for supremacy did not lead to a lasting happiness for any of her husbands or for herself.

When one compares the Wife's Tale with its analogues, it is clear that Chaucer has transformed his original sources into a complex, intellectually stimulating story. As Bartlett J. Whiting has pointed out in his discussion of the Wife of Bath's Tale in Sources and Analogues, "no better proof of Chaucer's overwhelming literary power and artistry is to be found than in a comparison of the Wife's Tale with its analogues."³

Despite the fact that the Wife's Tale shares with its analogues the motifs of the Hag's transformation and the Knight's quest, in none of the analogues does metamorphosis emerge as an integral thematic element. Metamorphosis, both physical and attitudinal, is one important device Chaucer has used to create his rich and complex tale,

which though entertaining as found in the analogues, is far more intellectually provocative when told by Chaucer.

I. THE KNIGHT, THE LOATHLY LADY, AND THE ANALOGUES

Among the extant tales from the later Middle English period there are three obvious analogues to the Wife of Bath's Tale: Gower's Tale of Florent from the Confessio Amantis; and two anonymous fifteenth-century narratives, the Marriage of Sir Gawaine, and the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell.⁴ All four of these tales have very similar plots. In every case a knight or a young man of noble birth must go on a quest in pursuit of an answer to the question, "What do women most desire?" The knight must find the correct answer to this question in order to save either his own life or the life of his king. In every case the knight has almost given up hope of learning the answer when an ugly hag appears and reveals to him that women desire sovereignty above all else. Each knight, either willingly or under duress, then must marry the hag who has given him this vital answer. On the wedding night each of the hags in the analogues, after noting her husband's dismay at her physical unattractiveness, offers her husband a choice of having her beautiful by day or by night. Only in Chaucer's story does the hag give her husband a choice between having her beautiful and possibly faithless, or ugly and faithful. In every case the husband allows his

wife to make the choice; and, in return for granting the wife sovereignty, all of the men are rewarded with a wife who remains beautiful both day and night. In the case of Chaucer's knight, the wife promises to be faithful as well as beautiful.

Chaucer's tale, then, has many basic plot elements in common with its analogues; however, there are also significant differences which distinguish Chaucer's plot from those of the analogues and which work to make Chaucer's tale more intricate. Moreover, the characterizations of Chaucer's Knight and Hag are entirely different from those of their counterparts, who are practically indistinguishable from each other in action and personality.

Because they are noble from the outset, the heroes of the analogues have little to learn from the actions of the stories. Although there are no lengthy passages describing the hero in either the Marriage of Sir Gawaine or the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, it is clear that Gawain is a noble knight who is respected and valued by the king. In the Marriage of Sir Gawaine Arthur refers to his nephew as "gentle Gawaine"⁵; and in the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell Arthur calls him "gentylle Gawen knyghte" (l. 142). In both stories Gawain is completely innocent of any misdoing.

In the Tale of Florent as well, Florent's virtues are clearly suggested near the beginning of the story:

Ther was whilom be daies olde
 A worthi knyht, and as men tolde
 He was Nevoeu to themperour
 And of his Court a Courteour:
 Wifles he was, Florent he hihte,
 He was a man that mochel myhte,
 Or armes he was desirous,
 Chivalerous and amorous,
 And for the fame of worldes speche,
 Strange aventures forto seche,⁶
 He rod the Marches al aboute.

Florent has killed Branchus in honest combat, and Branchus' grandmother sends Florent on the quest as an act of retribution. There is no hint of dishonor connected with the killing of Branchus or the resulting quest.

Unlike Florent and Gawain, who are noble characters at the beginning of their stories and who remain so throughout, Chaucer's Knight undergoes considerable character development. At the beginning of Chaucer's story the Knight is characterized as selfish and impetuous, aspects of his nature that lead to his rape of the girl. Thus, as E. T. Donaldson has pointed out, this knight bears little resemblance to his counterparts in the analogues:

In the analogues the story is handled in a different style, its real point being to demonstrate the courtesy of the hero, who weds the hag uncomplainingly and treats her as if she were the fairest lady in the land; in two versions the knight is Sir Gawain, the most courteous of Arthur's followers, who promises to marry her not in order to save his own life but his king's. The lady's transformation is thus a reward of virtue.⁷

As mentioned in the previous quotation, the circumstances of marriage for the heroes of the analogues differ from those of Chaucer's Knight. In both Gawain stories Gawain willingly marries the hag in order to save Arthur from death at the hand of an angry baron. Moreover, in the Marriage of Sir Gawaine, King Arthur is so confident that Gawaine will marry the ugly lady clad in scarlet that he offers Gawaine to her before she even asks for a reward:

'Giue thou ease me, lady,' he said,
 'or helpe me any thing,
 thou shalt haue gentle Gawaine, my cozen,
 & marry him with a ring.'
 (p. 238)

Although in the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell Arthur does not make the initial offer of marriage to Gawen in return for the correct answer to the question, Dame Ragnell asks to be given Gawen as her husband if her answer saves Arthur's life. In this version of the story, the King is reluctant to bind Gawen to such an agreement. However, he says that he will tell Gawen of her request:

'Mary,' sayd the kyng, 'I maye nott graunt the,
 To make warraunt Sir Gawen to wed the;
 Alle lyethe in hym alon.
 Butt and itt be so, I wolle do my labour,
 In savyng of my lyfe to make itt secur,
 To Gawen wolle I make my mone.'
 (ll. 291-296)

True to his character, Gawen offers to marry Dame Ragnell if this action will save Arthur from death.

In the Tale of Florent, Florent meets the Hag and reluctantly agrees to her terms if her answer saves him:

'If that non other chance
 Mai make my deliverance,
 Bot only thilke same speche
 Which, as thou seist, thou schalt me teche,
 Have hier myn hond, I schal thee wedde.'
 (ll. 1583-1587)

She trusts him to keep his promise. Therefore, she gives him the correct answer and tells him to return to her if this answer saves his life. As a true knight, Florent returns to her.

Unlike the forthright hags in the analogues, the Hag in the Wife's Tale is crafty when she makes her request of the Knight. Her caution is understandable because Chaucer's Knight is not honorable or trustworthy. Unlike his counterparts in the analogues, by raping the girl he has proven that he has no respect for women. The sly Hag could not expect him to return to her faithfully to uphold his distasteful end of their bargain if he knew what was expected of him in return for the answer to the question. When he agrees to her terms, therefore, the Knight does not know what the Hag will ask of him in return for telling him the correct answer:

'My leeve mooder,' quod this knyght, 'cer-
teyn
I nam but deed, but if that I kan seyn
What thyng it is that women moost desire.
Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre
hire.'

'Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand,'
quod she,
'The nexte thyng that I requere thee,
Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght,
And I wol telle it yow er it be nyght.'
'Have heer my trouthe,' quod the knyght,
'I grante.'

(ll.1005-1013)

In asking him to grant her anything that she requests in return for the answer to the question, the Hag has actually given the Knight a hint of the answer to Guinevere's question. Although he does not realize it, the Hag has complete sovereignty over his life since he has promised to do anything she asks him to do. Sovereignty is as important to the Hag as it is to Guinevere— as it is to the Wife of Bath.

In the wording of the Hag's answer, the Knight has received another clue to the answer of Guinevere's question. Before she gives him the answer, the Hag says:

'Thanne, . . . I dar me wel avante
Thy lyf is sauf; for I wol stonde therby,
Upon my lyf, the queene wol seye as I.'
(ll. 1014-106)

The Hag does not claim that her answer to the question is acknowledged by all women, but she guarantees that Guinevere will not challenge the accuracy of this answer.

The Knight has failed to perceive the importance of sovereignty to both women. Before much time has elapsed, the Knight receives a practical lesson in what the Hag most desires. As soon as he has given his answer to Guinevere, the Hag appears before the Court and demands that the Knight marry her.

Although sovereignty is an important theme in the analogues, only Chaucer creates a thematic unity which connects the rape, the quest, and the Hag's ability to trap the Knight into a marriage against his will. In raping the girl, the Knight has demonstrated what Bernard Huppé calls "a deep-seated failure to understand the basic principle of Courtly Love, the sovereignty of women."⁸ According to Huppé's interpretation, Guinevere sends the Knight on a quest to see if he is able to learn the importance of sovereignty to women.

The Queen's intervention supports the theme of sovereignty in yet another way, for Guinevere is not only the sovereign of the Court of Love but also the sovereign of her husband. The Queen wins jurisdiction over the Knight after she had "[s]o longe preyeden the kyng of grace" (l.895). She makes an emotional, not a legal, appeal to the King; and her appeal results in Arthur's giving her sovereignty over him. Her question, "What thyng is it that women moost desiren" (l. 905), serves to associate the rape, the Queen's appeal to Arthur, and the Knight's

future interactions with the Loathly Lady. The Knight, by committing the rape, has established man's physical supremacy over women. Guinevere, however, reestablishes women's sovereignty by persuading the King to set aside his ruling and to replace it with hers. The Knight must still learn the importance of sovereignty to the Queen, although a wiser man might have recognized the relationship between the Queen's actions and her question, since her behavior with her husband has already subtly demonstrated the importance she places upon female supremacy.

In contrast to the Wife of Bath's Tale, the initial episodes in the three analogues to the Wife's Tale have little bearing on the subsequent questions and ensuing quests. In the Tale of Florent, the circumstances of Florent's killing Branchus are so ambiguous that the reader cannot determine why Florent killed Branchus or which of them was the aggressor. The killing of Branchus serves merely as an event leading into the questioning and the quest. In the two Gawain stories, Gawain does nothing to initiate the action of the story; and it is Arthur, not Gawain, who must correctly answer the question or lose his life. In the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, Gromer Somer Joure is angry at Arthur because the King has given Gromer's land to Gawen. In the Marriage of Sir Gawaine it is unclear why the Baron challenges Arthur. Gawaine is not mentioned until Arthur

returns to Carlisle and tells Gawaine of meeting the Baron at Terne Wadling.

Thus of the four stories, only in the Wife's Tale is the theme of sovereignty directly related to plot and characterization. The Knight has violated women's sovereignty by raping a woman. In turn he is forced into a marriage against his will— a marriage allowing him to see that women can gain sovereignty through their wits if they fail to be granted it any other way. By allowing his wife to make the choice on their wedding night, the Knight demonstrates that he has learned that a truly gentil knyght would never force his will upon a woman. Unlike the flawless but vapid heroes in the analogues, Chaucer's Knight has become a different character by the end of the story from the convicted rapist whom Guinevere sent on a quest. If, as Huppé suggests, Guinevere chose the quest to see if the Knight would learn that he could not successfully force his will upon women, her efforts were not in vain.

I also wish to propose that the Hag in the Wife's Tale is more capable of learning from her own actions and adventures than are her counterparts. In the analogues the grotesque appearance and disgusting behavior of the hags are emphasized. Although Chaucer's Hag is ugly, her personality and wit are emphasized just as much as her appearance.

In the three analogues, the hags are little more than caricatures. For instance, in the Marriage of Sir Gawaine there is a grotesque description of the lady clad in scarlet:

Then there as shold haue stood her mouth,
 then there was sett her eye,
 the other was in her forehead fast
 the way that she might see.

Her nose was crooked & turnd outward,
 her mouth stood foule a-wry;
 a worse formed lady than shee was,
 neuer man saw with his eye.

(p. 237)

In the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, not only the hag's ugliness but also her phenomenal appetite and the Court's dismay at both emphasize the hag's repulsiveness. In this version, King Arthur first beholds the loathsome woman whose ugliness is contrasted with the beautiful and well-fitted horse that she is riding:

Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle,
 Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe ouere alle,
 Withe bleryd eyen gretter then a balle,
 Her mowithe was nott to lak;

Her tethe hyng ouere her lyppes;
 Her chekys syde as wemens hyppes;
 A lute she bare vpon her bak.
 Her nek long and therto greatt,
 Her here cloteryd on a hepe,
 In the sholders she was a yard brode,

Hangyng pappys to be an hors lode;
 And lyke a barelle she was made;
 And to reherse the fowlnesse of that lady,
 Ther is no tung may telle, securly,
 Of lothynesse inowghe she had.
 She 'satt on a palfray was gay begon,
 Withe gold besett and many a precious stone,
 Ther was an vnsemely syghte;
 So fowlle a creature withe-oute mesure,
 To ryde so gayly, I you ensure,
 Ytt was no reason ne ryghte.
 (ll. 231-251)

At the wedding feast she amazes the Court with her
 appetite and table manners:

She ete as moche as vj. that ther wore,
 That mervaylyd many a man;
 Her nayles were long ynchys ij^e.,
 Therwithe she breke her mete vngoodly,
 Therefore she ete alone.
 She ette ij^e. capons and also curlues ij^e.,
 And greatt bake metes she ete vp, perde,
 All men therof had mervaylle;
 Ther was no mete cam her before,
 But she ete itt vp lesse and more,
 That praty fowlle dameselle.
 (ll. 605-615)

In the Tale of Florent emphasis also is placed on
 the hag's appearance. Gower describes the hag as the
 ugliest creature on earth:

This olde wyht him hath awaited
 In place wher as he hire lefte:
 Florent his wofull heved uplefte
 And syh this vecke wher sche sat,
 Which was the lothlieste what
 That evere man caste on his yhe:
 Hire Nase bass, hire browes hyhe,
 Hire yhen smale and depe set,

Hire chekes ben with teres wet,
 And riven as an emty skyn
 Hangende doun unto the chin,
 Hire Lippes schrunken ben for age,
 Ther was no grace in the visage,
 Hir front was nargh, hir lockes hore,
 Sche loketh forth as doth a More.
 Hire Necke is schort, hir schuldres courbe,
 That myhte a mannes lust destourbe,
 Hire body gret and nothing smal,
 And schortly to discrive hire al,
 Sche hath no lith withoute a lak;
 Bot lich unto the wollesak
 Sche proferth hire unto this knyht,
 And bad him, as he hath behyht,
 So as sche hath ben his warant.
 That he hire holde covenant.
 And be the bridel sche him seseth.
 (ll. 1672-1697)

Although these are vivid physical descriptions of the hags, they provide little insight into the personality of these characters; and, except for small differences in the details of their descriptions, the hags in the analogues are hardly distinguishable from each other.

In contrast to her counterparts, Chaucer's Hag is characterized more by her words and actions than by external description. Her actual appearance is left largely to the imagination of the audience, for Chaucer says only that "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (l. 999). From the time of her appearance to the end of the tale, it is the Hag's insightful conversation by which she is most vividly characterized. The reader knows much more about what the Hag thinks and feels than what she looks like. As she says herself, "Thise olde folk kan muchel thyng" (l. 1004). She quickly and expertly

provides the Knight with the answer to Guinevere's question, but not before he has promised to grant her the next request that she makes of him. In this action she reveals that she is much craftier than her counterparts because, as I have pointed out in my discussion of the characterization of the Knight, she realizes that the Knight probably would not agree to marry her if he knew that marriage were the condition of their bargain. Moreover, she is intelligent enough not to trust him to keep his promise. Unlike her counterparts, the Hag is shrewd enough to accompany the Knight when he returns to the Court; and as soon as he has won his life by revealing the correct answer, she makes her request before Guinevere's Court that he marry her. Through tricking the Knight into marrying—by insuring that his promise be known to Guinevere's Court—the Hag proves herself to be far more intelligent than the other loathly ladies, as well as better able to determine her own fate.

The role that magic plays in each story also reveals Chaucer's Hag to be more capable than her counterparts. In all three of the analogues the hag is the unfortunate victim of her stepmother's magical powers. In the Tale of Florent and the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, the stepmother has blighted the beauty of her stepdaughter until such a time as a noble knight restores it by marrying her and by giving her sovereignty. (In the Marriage of

Sir Gawaine, this portion of the poem is missing.) Far from being the victim of magic, Chaucer's Hag is completely in charge of her own transformation, or perhaps transformations.

Although magic is not a crucial part of the tale until the Hag's physical conversion, the Wife explains in the very beginning that her tale takes place "manye hundred yeres ago" (l. 863) when "[t]he elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede" (ll. 860-861). In this opening passage she establishes the setting of her tale as pre-Christian Britain— a time before the numerous playful elves had been replaced, perhaps not for the better, with equally numerous friars. Therefore, from the beginning of her tale, the Wife has established that her story occurs during a time in which it was believed that mortals were often the victims of the magic used by elves and fairies.

Despite the fact that the Wife begins her story discussing the presence of the elves in King Arthur's day, an event that may be interpreted as supernatural does not occur until the Knight meets the Loathly Lady. This meeting takes place on the very day that the Knight is ending his unsuccessful quest and is returning sorrowfully to the Queen's Court:

The day was come that homward moste he
tourne.

And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
 In al this care, under a forest syde,
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;
 Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
 In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.
 But certeinly, er he cam fully there,
 Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
 No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
 Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf—
 A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.
 (ll. 988-999)

Although no mention is made of elves, fairies, or the elf-queene, perhaps the ladies dancing beside the forest are "[t]he elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye" (l. 860). The Wife has already said near the beginning of her tale that they "[d]aunced ful ofte in many a grene mede" (l. 861); and it is even possible that the Loathly Lady is the elf-queene herself. Besides being crafty and wise, traits one would expect to find in the sovereign of the elves, the Loathly Lady is able to understand Queen Guinevere. Perhaps she knows what the queen of mortals desires more than anything else because she, the queen of elves, values sovereignty above all. As I have said earlier, she prefaces her answer to the question by saying "Upon my lyf, the queene wol saye as I" (l. 1016). She never claims that her answer is acknowledged by all women, but it is obvious that sovereignty would be important to a queen whether her subjects were mortal or supernatural.

If the Loathly Lady is really the elf-queene, then the Knight may be in danger from the time he meets her

because, as the Wife indicated in the beginning of her tale, it was believed that elves were fond of tricking mortals into having sexual intercourse. Of course the Hag, if she is the elf-queene, realizes that she must use her wits as well as her magical powers to become the bed partner of the Knight. Perhaps she falsely believes that she has won him when she has tricked him into making her his wife. She certainly is dismayed by his indifference toward her on their wedding night.

Nevertheless, the Hag is not daunted by her husband's attitude toward her. She tells him that she can change their unhappy situation if he will only tell her why he objects to having her as his wife. Not suspecting that his wife has magical powers, the Knight has no faith in her ability to alter her appearance and age. However, when he states that he does not want her because she is old, ugly, and of low birth, his wife affirms that she "koude amende al this," (l. 1106) if such alterations would affect her husband's attitude toward her:

'Why fare ye thus with me this firste nyght?
 Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit.
 What is my gilt? For Goddes love, tel me it,
 And it shal been amended, if I may.'
 'Amended?' quod this knyght, 'allas! nay,
 nay!
 It wol nat been amended nevere mo.
 Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,
 And therto comen of so lough a kynde,
 That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.
 So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!'
 'Is this,' quod she, 'the cause of youre un-
 reste?'
 'Ye, certainly,' quod he, 'no wonder is.'

'Now, sire,' quod she, 'I koude amende al
 this,
 If that me liste, er it were dayes thre,
 So wel ye myghte bere yow unto me.
 (ll. 1094-1108)

In this passage it is clearly implied that the Hag has magical powers and is willing to use them to affect her husband's attitude toward her and their marriage.

Although the other hags cannot determine their own physical appearance, Chaucer's Hag can decide whether she will be beautiful and young or old and ugly. The counterparts offer their husbands the choice of their being beautiful by day or night. Presumably, their physical conversions would take place independent of their will because they are the victims of their stepmothers' spells. Chaucer's Hag gives her husband the choice of having her beautiful and possibly faithless, or ugly and faithful. Since Chaucer's Hag is not under the spell cast by another woman, she is the one capable of determining her own physical appearance. Moreover, her fidelity to the Knight depends not on magic but upon her own will. Far from being the helpless victim, Chaucer's Hag is in control of both magic and her own will. She can use her human and supernatural powers to make the Knight either happy or miserable.

Unlike their counterparts, then, Chaucer's Knight and Hag are both more realistic and more dynamic. While

Florent and Gawain remain basically static, Chaucer's Knight undergoes an attitudinal change which parallels and complements his wife's physical metamorphosis. Moreover, it is my belief that the wife's physical transformation is also indicative of her own attitudinal change, for she has found out that it is not enough to trap a man into marriage. She has learned that being crafty, deceitful, and untrustworthy will lead not only to the unhappiness of her husband but to her own unhappiness as well.

II. THE ATTITUDINAL METAMORPHOSIS OF THE KNIGHT AND THE HAG

In the early part of the story, to be sure, the Hag's actions are as ugly as her body as she contrives to trap the Knight into an unfortunate marriage. Through wit and deception, the Hag has won the Knight as her husband; but as I have noted, she learns on their wedding night that her trickery has not necessarily secured her a willing bed partner. Thus the Hag has learned that there are definite limits to what she can accomplish through deceit.

It is in their conversation just before the gentillesse speech that the Hag first shows signs of changing her attitude toward her husband. Until this time the Hag has treated the Knight like an object without feelings or needs of his own. When the Knight is reluctant to take her as a bed partner, she asks him, "What is my guilt?" (l. 1096), and offers to amend their unsatisfactory situation because she is beginning to realize that if she wants to secure the Knight's love, she must try to respond to his needs.

In her speech on gentillesse, which serves as her response to his objections to her, she reveals that she does not place the same value upon riches and position that the Knight does. However, perhaps the Hag can understand the Knight's objections to sleeping with a

woman who is not physically attractive. She should be able to appreciate his feelings because she has gone to a considerable amount of trouble to secure a young attractive bed partner for herself. If the length of her speech refuting each of the Knight's objections to her is an indication of the strength of her conviction, then she is much firmer in her defense of her low birth and poverty than she is in her defense of her unattractive physical appearance. For instance, she refutes his objection to her low birth in sixty-seven lines, lines which support her contention that "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis." (l. 1170); and she assures her husband that she is not ashamed of her station:

Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
 Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
 Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.
 Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne
 To lyven vertuously and weyve synne.
 (ll. 1172-1176)

In a similar manner she presents a thirty-four-line explanation of why he should not object to her for her poverty. She contends that poverty is honorable to those who do not covet and who patiently bear their fate. Moreover, poverty even enables a man to know his God and himself. She ends her talk on poverty firmly stating that he should not object to her because she is not rich:

Poverté a spectacle is, as thynketh me,
 Thurgh which he may his verray freendes see.
 And therfore, sire, syn that I noght yow greve,
 Of my poverté namoore ye me repreve.
 (ll. 1203-1206)

When she tries to refute his complaints that she is old and ugly, however, her argument is not as convincing or as extensive as it was when she was defending her low birth and poverty. Although the Knight objects to his wife because she is unattractive, she suggests that at least he will not have to worry about becoming a cuckold, for whatever consolation such an argument may provide. Perhaps she ends her speech on gentillesse willing to try to "fulfille [his] worldly appetit" (l. 1218) because she realizes that the following argument has not been very consoling to a young lusty knight:

Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;
 And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee
 Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
 Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon
 favour,
 And clepe hym fader, for youre gentillesse;
 And auctours shal I fynden, as I gesse.
 Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old,
 Than drede you noght to been a cokewold;
 For filthe and eelde, also moot I thee,
 Been grete wardeyns upon chastitee.
 (ll. 1207-1216)

By acknowledging her husband's desires and trying to fulfill them, she reveals a different attitude from the one she had as a selfish hag who used trickery to trap

a man into marriage. No longer concerned with just her own wishes, the Knight's wife is willing to consider her husband's needs. This is the first sign that the Hag's attitude toward her husband is changing.

Consequently, rather than using her wit to trick him into giving her what she wants, the Hag gives the Knight a straightforward choice:

Chese now,' quod she, 'oon of thise thynges
tweye:
To han me foul and old til that I deye,
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
And nevere yow displese in al my lyf;
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
Or in som oother place, may wel be.'
(ll. 1219-1226)

Although the question is direct, the Hag uses her wit when she gives the Knight the choice of having her fair and possibly faithless, or ugly and faithful. His answer will reveal if he has learned anything from her gentillesse speech or if he is still the impetuous, selfish man that he was at the beginning of his adventures. If he still places value only on physical desire, then he will choose to have her fair, regardless of her faithfulness; however, if the Hag has convinced him that virtue is more important than appearance, then he will choose to have her foul but faithful. When he allows her to make the decision, she knows that he has changed because he no longer tries to

make himself happy by putting his desires first. As a reward for this unselfishness, as well as in an effort to "amend" their unhappy situation, the Hag decides to be both beautiful and faithful.

Even though it appears that she grants him her beauty and virtue because he has given her sovereignty, his granting her sovereignty is really superfluous because she certainly has had supremacy from the beginning of their relationship. It is more likely that she decides to be beautiful and faithful not because he has granted her sovereignty but because he has placed her desires above his own. In this action he has proven that he has changed from a selfish, impetuous knight into a considerate, gentle husband.

Furthermore, there is the statement in the text that, far from taking advantage of her sovereignty, the Knight's wife "obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (ll. 1255-1256). Thus their marital happiness is based on mutual love and consideration, not feminine supremacy. In her new love and devotion, the Knight's wife is as beautiful in her actions as she is in her form.

Like his wife, the Knight undergoes an attitudinal metamorphosis. His change in attitude toward women is revealed when he allows his wife to make the choice of

whether she will be beautiful but possibly faithless, or ugly and faithful. In his reply to the Hag's offer, the Knight is as respectful and considerate as a good husband could be:

'My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth youreself which may be moost ples-
ance,
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the wheither of the two;
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.'
(ll. 1230-1235)

By refusing to force his will upon his wife, the Knight acknowledges that a woman has the right to choose her bed partners— a right that he certainly had not conceded at the beginning of the tale when he raped the girl.

The question of fidelity, in regard to the theme of sovereignty, has an importance here that should not be overlooked. As I pointed out in the last chapter, in all three of the analogues, unlike the Wife's Tale, the knights were asked to choose whether to have their wives beautiful by day or night. Only in Chaucer's tale must the Knight decide whether he is willing to have an ugly wife in return for one who will promise to be true or a beautiful wife who will make her own decisions regarding her bed partners. In answering his wife's offer, the Knight decides that they will be happier if his wife is given the privilege of determining which choice will afford the most pleasure

and honor to both of them. Far from having the attitude of a rapist, the Knight now respects his wife's right to mastery over her own body and sexual conduct.

In response to this considerate, polite action, the wife promises to be both fair and good:

'Kys me,' quod she, 'we be no lenger wrothe;
 For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe,
 This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.
 I prey to God that I moote sterven wood,
 But I to yow be also good and trewe
 As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe.
 And but I be to-morn as fair to seene
 As any lady, emperice, or queene,
 That is bitwixe the est and eke the west;
 Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest.
 Cast up the curtyng, looke how that it is.'
 (ll. 1239-1249)

By attempting to make each other happy, the Knight and his wife have the initial basis for a perfect marriage:

And whan the knyght saugh verrailly al this,
 That she so fair was, and so yong therto,
 For joye he hente hire in his armes two,
 His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.
 A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
 And she obeyed hym in every thyng
 That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.
 And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
 In parfit joye.

(ll. 1250-1258)

Therefore, the Wife's Tale, which appears to argue for women's sovereignty, can be interpreted as also demonstrating the harmony of a marriage in which two people are

converted by love from being selfish and deceitful into being respectful and considerate. By practicing gentillesse and mutual respect, the Knight and his wife live "[i]n parfit joye" (l. 1258).

The Wife certainly fails to see it, but there is a close relationship between the transformations that occur and the subject of husband and wife relationships in the Wife's Tale. Even the digression, which the Wife borrows from Ovid's Metamorphoses, relates these two elements, according to the Wife's altered version of the story. In the original version of the Midas story it is Midas' barber and not his wife who cannot keep the secret about his misshapen ears; however, in the Wife's version, Midas deserves the ears of an ass for two reasons. Not only does he prefer Pan's music to Apollo's, but he is also foolish enough to allow his wife to know the secret because "He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;" (l. 958). Unfortunately, Midas' wife cannot keep the confidence.

Like Midas, the Knight trusts his wife when he allows her to make the decision about whether it is better for her to be faithful and ugly or faithless and beautiful. Fortunately for the Knight, his bride, unlike Midas' wife, is worthy of his trust because she has undergone a metamorphosis in attitude that is as striking as her physical transformation.

Thus, in the two cases of physical transformation in the Wife's Tale, the physical manifestations of the metamorphoses are symbolic of character traits. Midas' ears of an ass are appropriate because he trusts an untrustworthy wife. The physical beauty of the Knight's wife is symbolic of her trustworthiness and love for her husband.

In addition to narrating a story that can be interpreted as having a meaning opposite to the one that she assigns to it, the Wife of Bath surely demonstrates in her Prologue that sovereignty of one spouse over the other does not lead to a mutually satisfying marriage. For instance, it is difficult to believe that her old husbands were truly happy once she had gained sovereignty:

But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
 And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
 What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
 But it were for my profit and myn ese?
 I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,
 That many a nyght they songen 'weilawey!'
 The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,
 That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe.
 I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
 That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe
 To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre.
 They were ful glad whan I spak to hem faire;
 For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously.
 (ll. 211-224)

Moreover, her fourth and fifth marriages have been far from ideal. Her fourth husband makes her very

jealous by taking a lover, and she describes how she retaliates:

I seye, I hadde in herte greet despit
 That he of any oother had delit.
 But he was quit, by God and by Seint Joce!
 I made hym of the same wode a croce;
 Nat of my body, in no foul manere,
 But certeinly, I made folk swich cheere
 That in his owene grece I made hym frye
 For angre, and for verray jalousye.
 By God! in erthe I was his purgatorie,
 For which I hope his soule be in glorie.
 (ll. 481-490)

She finally gains mastery of her fifth husband, although their marriage is not happy at first. Because she has married him for love, the Clerk is able to mistreat her and still keep her good will:

Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I telle.
 God lete his soule nevere come in helle!
 And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe;
 That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,
 And evere shal unto myn endyng day.
 But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,
 And therwithal so wel koude he me glose,
 Whan that he wolde han my bele chose,
 That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,
 He koude wyne agayn my love anon.
 I trowe I loved hym best, for that he
 Was of his love daungerous to me.
 (ll. 503-514)

Although the Wife's marital exploits are entertaining to read, it cannot be argued that she has been an ideal wife to any of her husbands. Having sovereignty may have

made her happier, but it has not really made her marriages mutually satisfying. Thus the Wife's autobiographical account in her Prologue actually serves to show that domination of either spouse by the other is detrimental to marriage. Although the Wife has been married often, she has never had a marriage characterized by love and mutual respect. Although she fails to see it, the Knight and the former Hag are happy not because he has given her the sovereignty to make a decision, but because they have learned to respect each other's feelings and wishes.

Because Chaucer the pilgrim and the Wife of Bath share some characteristics as storytellers, the following statement by E. T. Donaldson about the narrator of the Canterbury Tales may also be relevant for the Wife of Bath:

Apart from humor and an implied compliment to the sophisticated intelligence of the audience, what has been gained, one may ask, by the poet's considered refusal to speak directly, in his own person? The way of indirection is generally the way of irony, and allows for a pervasive suggestiveness to which the reader is then free to assign any number of meanings. Irony, moreover, provides in both tone and content for the possibility of a sustained paradox. Medieval literature abounds in satire, not infrequently full of savage condemnation. Chaucer's satire, by and large, is far funnier than the rest, and yet partly for this reason perhaps more telling. The narrator's failure to see what is wrong emphasizes the wrong; irony of which this is a complex kind, always heightens. Yet a satiric portrait, while intellectually telling, need not

thanks to the narrator's good nature, be emotionally scathing. This is not the only way to write successful satire, but it was clearly Chaucer's intention to write satire of a rather special kind; to present both halves of the human paradox and to retain both without allowing the positive and negative values to cancel each other out.⁹

Chaucer's choice of the Wife of Bath as narrator of the story is ironically appropriate. Although the Wife considers herself an expert on marriage and believes that sovereignty is what a woman most desires, she fails to see an important truth that emerges from her own story. The Hag ultimately values love and gentillesse more than she values sovereignty. Although the Wife is ostensibly the creator of her story, she does not understand the full meaning of what she has said. Having sovereignty has afforded her temporary victories, but no lasting happiness. Unlike the Hag in her story, the Wife fails to see the true significance of love and gentillesse in a mutually satisfying marriage.

NOTES

¹
Joseph P. Roppolo, "The Converted Knight in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" College English, (1951), 263-269.

²
Geoffrey Chaucer, The Wife of Bath's Tale, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 1. 1218. All subsequent references to the Wife of Bath's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Prologue are taken from this text.

³
Bartlett J. Whiting, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), p. 224.

⁴
Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, eds. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 223-264. In The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer F. N. Robinson also mentions the ballad King Henry as an analogue in his notes on p. 703; however, this ballad shares far fewer elements in common with the Wife's Tale than the three analogues I have mentioned in my text.

⁵
The Marriage of Sir Gawaine, in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, eds. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York: Humanities Press, 1958),

p. 238. Subsequent references to the Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, and the Marriage of Sir Gawaine are taken from Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

⁶
John Gower, Confessio Amantis, in The Works of John Gower, Vol. II., ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 74. All subsequent references to the Confessio Amantis are taken from this text.

⁷
E. T. Donaldson, Chaucer's Poetry (New York: The Ronald Press, 1975), p. 1077.

⁸
Bernard F. Huppé, "Rape and Woman's Sovereignty in The Wife of Bath's Tale," Modern Language Notes (1977), 380.

⁹
Donaldson, pp. 1040-1041.

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