

Sexual Independence in Chaucer's the Wife of Bath's Tale

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ABSTRACT

If we look at Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's* tale from the perspective of its deviation from the original Arthurian romances, and assume that the tales sprang from an earlier common source, we can better understand the social commentary Chaucer was making at the time. Chaucer's tale deviates from its sources in one key area: the idea of female sovereignty. This paper discusses the deviations in Chaucer's tale from the original romance tales, and the implications of those deviations.

DISCUSSION

Critics often suggest that the supernatural "is not peculiar to *romance*, but it is clearly characteristic of it ... creat [ing] the special atmosphere of the *romance* world where elements of social reality and the unnatural commingle" (Finlayson 442). While the supernatural plays an important role, "courtly *romances* [also] make love an essential part of the character of the knight, and use it as a motivation for the plot" (Finlayson 444). In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the *Wife of Bath* tells a tale that is arguably derived from the same source as both *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng Kyng Arthour* (hereafter referred to as *The Weddyng*) and *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine* (hereafter referred to as *The Marriage*). These three tales fall into the generalized category of *romance*, or "narratives dealing with aristocratic personae and involving combat and/or love ... if written after 1100" (Shepherd 429). While all three tales share the same basic plot, the quest to discover what it is a woman truly desires, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* (hereafter referred to as the *WOB's Tale*) deviates from its two counterparts in two very substantial areas: the rape in the beginning and the wyf's own volition in the end. These deviations from the original source beg the questions: what were Chaucer's motivations for changing the story, and how do the changes alter our expectations with regard to the deeper meaning of the tale?

Our expectations when reading chivalric romance tales are of knights displaying their prowess in feats of battle and jousting

tournaments, loyalty to one's king, and of course, the rescuing of ladies in the most genteel manner with grace, dignity, and humility; this is not the case in the *WOB's Tale*. Unlike *The Weddyng* or *The Marriage*, the *WOB's Tale* is highly sexually charged. The *WOB's Tale* opens with a rape, whereas *The Weddyng* and *The Marriage* open with a hunt. The *WOB's Tale's* literal rape may indeed be Chaucer's interpretation of the original hunt as a symbol of man's rape of the natural world; or the rape could merely be a device to bring the reader closer to the sexual nature of the tale. Chaucer's motivations for deviating from the original hunt scene in his tale could be as simple as the sensationalism of a ribald tale; after all, sex has always been a selling point. It is this deviation, however, that alters our expectations of the tale itself: we can no longer expect the knight to follow the known chivalric code, and we must expect the unexpected.

The knight in the *WOB's Tale*, unlike in *The Marriage* or *The Weddyng*, is an unknown, unnamed knight; it is not Sir Gawain, as it is in the original tale. The *Wife of Bath* simply refers to the knight as a "lusty bachelor" (Chaucer 883). The image of the knight being "lusty" destroys our expectations of him as a knight, and he is portrayed as a rapist rather than a hero: his actions make him an antihero. As readers we have become accustomed to referring to knights as "gentle" or "courteous," as we do with Sir Gawain who is known as "gentle Gawaine" (Unknown 151). To refer to the knight as "lusty" rather than "gentle" suggests that he, unlike Sir Gawain, has an overactive sexual desire. As a rapist his actions

suggest that he is not concerned with female sovereignty, rather when "he saugh a mayde walkinge him befor, / of whiche mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / by verray force he rafte hire maydenheed" (Chaucer 886-888). It is not a wonder then, that the rapist-knight remains nameless throughout the tale, as his actions portray him as the foil to all other knights. His unchivalrous actions, so unbecoming our expectations of a knight, mark him as being too lowly to have a name.

It is also possible that the rape in the opening of the *WOB's Tale* represents the dichotomy between the sexually repressed knight, and the sexually independent wyf whom he meets in the forest. The sexual repression of the knight is what causes him to be prone to violent sexual outbursts, such as rape. The tale itself is told by a character that is admittedly sexually independent, and her tale is one of a sexually independent woman. Throughout her prologue, the Wife of Bath expresses her desire for, and enjoyment of, sexual activities saying that she "wol bistowe the flour of al myn age / in the actes and in fruit of marriage" (Chaucer 113-114). The Wife of Bath's tale reflects her own sexual independence by placing the wyf as the aggressor in the marriage bed. This reversal of sexual gender roles again displays Chaucer's ability to take advantage of our expectations. As readers we expect that the "lady" in the tale will be demure and the "knight" will be amorous; this is not so in the *WOB's Tale* where the sexual aggressor is the wife rather than the husband. If the tale is truly about female sovereignty, then it stands to reason that the "foul lady" would be as sexually independent as any man, for she represents women's abilities to rule themselves in all aspects, including their sexuality.

The question still remains: why would Chaucer choose to deviate from the original model and open his tale with a rape instead of a hunt? It has been speculated that in the original model for the three tales, the "foul lady" represents the land and the sovereignty given to the king through his courtship of, and marriage to, the land. Manuel Aguirre, in his article "The Riddle of Sovereignty," surmises that "if the hunt is one symbol for the courtship, then the rape is a literalization of the symbol: it represents the purely sexual aspect of an episode no longer associated with royal rule and territorial issues, just as *sovereynetee* in [Chaucer's] tale has ceased to relate to the land and has been

narrowed down to sovereignty-in-love" (279). The rape at the beginning of the tale then serves to sever the ties between the feminine land and the masculine royal rule and return the tale to its proper place: the bedroom. The tale is no longer about the king's relationship to the land, but rather about the relationship between men and women as independent sexual beings.

Thus far I have refrained from referring to the "foul lady" as a "hag," as so many critics have done. The "foul lady" is not a hag, but rather she represents the Celtic triple goddess. The "wyf," as she is known in the *WOB's Tale*, is also referred to as a "foul lady" in *The Weddyng* and *The Marriage*, but never a "hag." The wyf represents the supernatural in the tale: she is the Crone, Maiden, and Mother of the triple goddess. She is described in all three tales as being old and ugly, sometimes with huge tusks and enormous breasts: "she was so fowl and horyble: / she had two teth, on every side, / as borys tuskes – I woll nott hyde" (Unknown 547-549), but she is nevertheless the magical element in the romance.

The wyf, much like the Wife of Bath, is merely the representation of a lady who has past her prime: the two characters share more than a few qualities in common, not the least of which is their sexuality. The wyf also represents the hidden wish of the Wife of Bath: to have the ability to become young and beautiful again. Here again the wyf in the tale echoes the Wife of Bath; the wyf's red clothes mirror the red hose worn by the Wife of Bath: red being the color of love and lust.

The second key deviation from the original model in Chaucer's tale is the wyf's own volition in the end. In both *The Weddyng* and *The Marriage*, the "foul lady" suffers from a curse and is in need of a man to give her sovereignty and mastery over him in order to break the spell, saying that she "was shapen by nygramancy, / with my stepdame – God have mercy on me! / and by enchauntement / and shold have bene oderwise, understond, / evyn tyll the best of Englonde / had wedyd me, vraitment" (Unknown 691-696). In the *WOB's Tale*, the wyf is in complete control over her shape shifting; she is not under a spell, nor is she cursed, rather she chooses for herself her own outward manifestation, telling us that she "wol be to yow bothe, / this is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good" (Chaucer 1240-1241). The wyf, of her own volition, chooses to take the shape of a young and beautiful woman in order to

“fulfille” her husband’s “worldly appetyt” (Chaucer 1218). Again, by Chaucer’s giving the wyf the ability to take on any form she chooses, our generic expectations of what a chivalric romance tale should be are denied. Traditionally, in a chivalric romance tale, a lady would only be foul and ugly if she were under a curse; a lady would not choose to be unattractive in order to gain a sexual partner. This deviation from the original model may be Chaucer’s commentary on the ridiculousness of love in romance tales, where knights fall in love with a maid’s beauty without ever speaking to her. In this tale the knight must listen to his “foul” wife before he is allowed to fall in love with her beauty, and therefore may actually love her for the person she is, rather than what she looks like.

When we are faced with the reality that the wyf has chosen her outward form, that she has chosen to look foul, we immediately understand the depths of her total manipulation of the knight, as well as her definitions of beauty, since their meeting. Susan Sara Thomas, in her article “The Problem of Defining Sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” suggests that “the wyf’s manipulation of definition is masterful, as she convincingly proves that her desirability is primarily dependent upon the definition of what is desirable. And, ultimately the matter of sovereignty rests upon its definition” (88-89). Prior to giving herself to her husband as a fair woman, the wyf explains to him what it actually is to be desirable. In this way she is defining for him what he should consider desirable. By being the one to define desirability the wyf takes sovereignty from her husband before he “gives” it to her; she is in effect the master of their marriage.

In having the wyf define for her husband what is beautiful and desirable, Chaucer takes our generic expectation, that husband is head of the household, and turns it upside-down. Chaucer gives us a knight who is unable to define for himself what makes someone desirable, and as Thomas suggests, “this is the crucial problem – that he is unable to define and articulate his own desires” (91). His lack of ability to “articulate his own desires” leaves him open to be possessed completely by a sexually independent woman: the wyf. Why then would the wyf need her husband to say that she has sovereignty and mastery over him when it is plainly obvious that she already possesses it? It is possible that her desire for his submission will enhance her sexual pleasure. It is also possible that, as Susan

Carter in her essay “Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted” suggests, “the unequal power balance between the hag who can change shape and the knight who remains nameless is well-established by this stage; the bride hands over phallic power to a man she has selected, won, and is bedding in a private moment of pleasure, presumably so that her own pleasure will be enhanced by his empowerment” (333). What does all this mean? Quite simply, that Chaucer, by deviating from the original theme of the tale, has given us a tale about a woman who toys both emotionally and physically with her husband under the guise of the issue of sovereignty and mastery in the home as a means of gratifying her own sexual pleasure.

Chaucer’s motivation for changing the original framework of this tale appears to be to redefine the binaries: the rapist becomes the raped, the hunter becomes the hunted, the possessor becomes the possessed. Much like the wyf redefining for her husband the concept of desirability, Chaucer redefines the male and female sexual gender roles in the *WOB’s Tale*. This redefinition of gender roles in a romance tale demonstrates Chaucer’s insight into the changing wants and desires of his readers. Throughout the blossoming of the romance genre women were taking on larger and more important roles, rather than being relegated to the corner as they were in more heroic, shame based poetry. Chaucer brings the women to the forefront in the *WOB’s Tale*. The tale is narrated by an unconventional, sexually independent woman and is about a woman luring, wedding, and bedding a man. By reversing our expectations in this tale Chaucer gives us a deeper insight into the meaning of sovereignty within a marriage. For Chaucer, sovereignty is not held by the male simply because he is male, but rather is held by the one who can articulate their wants and desires. In the case of the *WOB’s Tale*, the one with mastery and sovereignty is the supernatural wyf, as she is the one able to define her desires. The ability to define and redefine terms in order to attain mastery in the home is also perhaps a glimpse into Chaucer’s belief that literacy and education are what constitute sovereignty. While Chaucer’s wyf is “foul” and the knight is considered an aristocrat, his inability to define for himself what sovereignty is leads to his being the possessed rather than the possessor.

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While *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng Kyng Arthour*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* share a common plot as well as ancestor, it is in Chaucer's deviations from the original that we understand the meaning of sovereignty. All three tales have elements of the supernatural, have aristocratic personae, and deal in some fashion with the subject of love and are therefore considered to be in the romantic genre. It is however, in their sharp contrast in sexual content that the three tales diverge. Chaucer's tale is of a sexually independent woman claiming her mastery and sovereignty over her chosen husband, rather than that of a woman doomed to live under a curse until a gentle knight comes and gives her sovereignty over him in order to break the spell. These deviations from the original model are motivated by Chaucer's desire to take advantage of our expectations as readers, and in doing so, Chaucer catches us off guard and gives us new meaning and insight into an old tale, thereby giving sexual independence to his wyfs.

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