

**LOATHLY LADIES' LESSONS: NEGOTIATING
STRUCTURES OF GENDER IN "THE TALE OF FLORENT",
"THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE" AND "THE WEDDING
OF SIR GAWAIN AND DAME RAGNELLE"**

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ABSTRACT

Gower's "Tale of Florent", Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and the anonymous romance "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle" are three late-medieval English texts that repeatedly confront their male protagonists with the problem of female desire, asking them, at each crucial stage of plot development, to acknowledge women's sovereignty in both the senses of "autonomy" and "power". It might seem that in so doing they express a critical view of established period ideas of appropriate gender roles. However, a closer look at the individual plot configurations in which the theme is explored in these texts shows a more complex set of attitudes at play; ultimately, they reveal the tensions among the various hierarchies of women's (and men's) positions which the culture sustains. At the same time, their account of a contestation of sovereignty between genders develops into a commentary on other kinds of social hierarchy, other concepts of control. Finally, the texts also negotiate the limits of the generic framework in which they operate and of the value system which it embodies.

Keywords: romance; fin amour; gender system; loathly lady; intertextuality, metafiction

Gower's "Tale of Florent", Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and the anonymous romance "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle" are three late-medieval English texts that repeatedly confront their male protagonists with the problem of female desire.¹ In the first instance, the men must find out what women most desire to save their own lives; in the second, they must comply with the demands of the "loathly lady" or hag who is willing to trade the answer she possesses for a promise of marital (and sexual) union; and finally, they must decline her offer which lets them shape her future destiny, and leave the matter in her hands if they are to achieve their happily-ever-after with the hag turned into a beauty. These respective steps in the men's quest – from realising the very *fact* of

¹ The plot of the anonymous romance is retold, with some modifications, in the likewise anonymous ballad "The Marriage of Sir Gawain"; however, as this version was preserved with a number of substantial lacunae which preclude reliable enquiry of its take on the events, I have decided not to include it in the comparative analysis that follows.

female desire through its more or less enforced accommodation to the ultimate full and witting recognition – are highly appropriate in reflecting the answer to that initial “test question” of what women desire, namely sovereignty. At the same time, it is this insistent re-presenting and, more importantly still, the verbalisation of this proposition as a thesis in need of asserting, that is one of two key aspects differentiating the Middle English tales from Irish narratives featuring the hag-turned-beauty motif which are generally viewed as the zero point of its development (Aguirre, 275). There, the narrative is built solely around that middle incident: the hero has to venture well beyond his comfort zone and “act against both instinct and custom” (Aguirre, 276) in satisfying the hag’s demands for physical intimacy; by this, he proves himself worthy of kingship and is rewarded with the transformation of the hag – who represents the sovereignty, or rule of the land – into a lovely woman. This summary account also makes clear the other point of difference between the Middle English and the Irish tales: the shift in the application of the concept of sovereignty from the political to the domestic sphere, as well as the move from a clearly figurative to at least partly literal interpretation. In short, the Middle English narratives are much more directly concerned with who rules – or should or should not rule – whom in the relationships between men and women, in love and marriage alike. Despite the seal of approval which these texts apparently put on female sovereignty, a closer look at the individual plot configurations where this idea is explored shows a more complex set of attitudes at play, neither fully affirmative nor mere lip service which would produce a fiction of sovereignty for women in order to uphold existing gendered social structures. Ultimately, the texts reveal the tensions among the various ideologies of women’s (and men’s) positions which the culture sustains. However, there is yet another aspect that ought to be considered in the mapping of the Middle English tales’ approach to this issue: the degree to which their account of a contestation of sovereignty between genders develops into a commentary on other kinds of social hierarchy, other concepts of control. Such a translation may corroborate an impulse to deflect attention from the problems of gender, but also – paradoxically even in that very deflection – the centrality of gender as a conceptual tool in treating problems of power balance in general.

The Tale in the Setting: Narrators and Contexts

In the case of Gower and Chaucer, the use and treatment of the concept of sovereignty – including its sphere(s) of reference and the value system(s) in which it is apparently or obliquely integrated – inevitably depends on the larger context of *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales* respectively. The most proximate – and obvious – level of mediation and positioning is naturally that of the narrator figure to whom the tale is given and who, in either case, presents it to support a specific point, as an exemplum or a *romance à thèse*. The flamboyant Wife of Bath’s ambiguous involvement with her tale is a fact notoriously noted and explored; the seemingly much more reliable figure of authority, Genius, the priest of Venus, who delivers the story in *Confessio*, might appear more neutral, with less of a personal investment in the narrative, but his double capacity as a priestly figure and as a speaker for Love also makes his exemplum charged with more meanings than that “obedience / Mai wel fortune a man to love / And sette him in his lust above” (CA, I, 1858–60).

This manoeuvring of Genius between matters of love and matters of morality then points to the next level of engagement with the theme of female sovereignty in *Confessio* and *The Canterbury Tales*: the discourses that, in their turn, shape the two narrator figures.

Gower introduces his fiction with a lengthy “Prologue” in which he offers several clues for the interpretation of his project; this initial outline, however, proves rather misleading, a proposition that must be checked and revised as the reader progresses through the text. Having first stipulated that the primary goal of writing is instruction, he admits nevertheless that “who that al of wisdom writ / It dulleth ofte a mannes wit” (CA, Prologue, 13–14) and proposes to pursue a middle course in writing “a bok between the tweie, / Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore” (18–19). The later specification sets up certain expectations as to how the focus on “lust” and “lore” is to be distributed: “this prologe is so assised / That it to wisdom al belongeth” (66–67), whereas “[w]han the prologe is so despended, / This bok schal afterward ben ended / Of love” (73–75). Yet even the remainder of the “Prologue” problematises this distinction and highlights the necessity to be wary of taking Gower’s terms at face value. It is emphatically love, more precisely *caritas*, or rather its absence, that represents the core theme of the following pessimistic survey of the current state of society (93–121): the members of individual estates each strive after their own interests, while the social love that used to bind them in pursuit of common profit has disappeared.

At the beginning of Book I, however, the narrator seems to proceed with the original plan. While the dichotomy wisdom / love proved a false lead, a new one appears with the shift from *caritas* to *naturatus amor*; the narrator pronounces the task of restoring social love by his poetry – as Arion was able to do (CA, Prologue, 1053–69) – too formidable for his abilities and proposes instead to turn to

[...] thing is noght so strange,
Which every kinde hath upon honde,
And wherupon the world mot stonde,
And hath don sithen it began,
And schal whil ther is any man;
And that is love, of which I mene
To trete, as after schal be sene.
In which ther can noman him reule,
For loves lawe is out of reule[.]
(CA, I, 10–18)

With a profession of personal experience in the matter (no “order” in the “law of love”), the narrator assumes the persona of Amans (Lover), complaining to Venus and Cupid that his long service to his lady has brought him no reward. With that kind of formulation, we are firmly situated in the conceptual world of *fin amour*, with its privileging yet paradoxically reductive view of women. However, as suggested above, the entry of Venus’ priest, Genius, who is to guide Amans through his confession in preparation for the final intervention by Venus, destabilises and challenges that contextualisation once again. Three aspects come into play here: Genius’ own characterisation of his office and its actual execution, his literary pedigree, and finally the trajectory of the whole text. Although Genius claims to be versed primarily in matters of (heterosexual) love and to

possess only the minimal required expertise in his priestly function,² the way he guides Amans through his confession with illustrative exempla for each of the seven deadly sins – purportedly in the way they manifest in amorous matters – suggests otherwise. The greater number of his stories has general moral – or even political – relevance (Irvin, 95), with their application to the appropriate conduct in love often tenuous or left unexplained.³ Thus the concern with social harmony (which transcends matters of gender, as far as the Prologue’s utter indifference to that aspect seems to suggest) overrides and incorporates the discussion of love in the narrow sense introduced at the beginning of Book I. Moreover, as Irvin argues, the same “double pull” is present in the literary background of the persona of Genius: the use of the figure in Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* (presiding over sexual love) as opposed to that in Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae* (in effect subordinating natural to divine love) (Irvin, 80–84). Finally, the theme of self-control steadily gains importance in Genius’ narratives, building towards the climactic moment when Amans is cured of his infatuation and returns to reason.

All this suggests that the discourse of heterosexual love and, by extension, gender concerns are, if not circumscribed by, then at least confronted with other positions, whether we see this process, alongside Irvin, as an open dialogue constituted by a “paratactic” juxtaposition of clerical and what could, with a degree of caution, be labelled “courtly” perspectives and textual traditions, or whether we interpret it, with Yeager, as a special coding of social and political criticism. “The Tale of Florent” operates within this framework and the multiplicity of perspectives and points of concern outlined above shapes both its protagonist and the interplay of generic conventions which distinguishes Gower’s version of the story from the others.

The crucial factor that informs the reading of the tale presented by Alison of Bath is her ambiguous position – as a character – in relation to the bulk of antimatrimonial/misogynist textual tradition which she references and attacks in her “Prologue” – and which simultaneously produces her (Hansen, 26–57). The persistent problem that arises here is precisely the tension between the apparent “roundedness” of her character, the sense of a subject speaking in a distinct and unmistakably individual voice, and the equally evident fact that all this is in the last instance constructed from established textual material. If we privilege the former aspect, we can read her narrative as a realisation of the point which she has made in the “Prologue”, namely that

² For I with love am al withholde,
So that the lasse I am to wyte,
Thogh I ne conne bot a lyte
Of othre things that ben wise:
I am noght tawht in such a wise;
For it is noght my comun us
To speke of vices and vertus,
Bot al of love and of his lore (CA, I, 62–69)

See Irvin 2014, 90, for a detailed discussion of the implications of that statement for the interpretation of *Confessio*.

³ Irvin argues otherwise in *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*: “Gower stresses the analogous relationship between tales of love and tales of politics, usually by Genius telling an exemplary tale that primarily concerns politics or ethics, and either Amans asking specifically for a tale in the “cause of love” or Genius stating directly that such a political or ethical story is analogous” (95). My point is that, while this is true, the precise nature of the analogy is often left unexpressed.

“if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.”
 (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”, 693–96)

The tale would then represent a “turning of tables” on the dominant clerical discourse, constructed to vindicate the Wife’s position of resistance, with the individual characters in the story filling a pattern designed to legitimise female sovereignty in marriage which Alison claims for herself but for which she cannot find authoritative support in her “Prologue”. At the same time, such a perspective must accommodate the fact that the Wife’s “characteristic voice” apparently disappears precisely at that moment in the narrative which invests the powerful woman with indisputable moral authority – her “lecture” on true gentility (which also moves the argument of the tale beyond its otherwise heavily gendered focus). The match between the arguments advanced in that crucial passage and those voiced elsewhere by Chaucer in his authorial persona, as well as the appeal to authorities which he references in that capacity, might lead us to read this move as a strategic intervention from a superior level, a gesture endorsing Alison’s theses. Conversely, however, it may equally well produce the effect of an ironic distancing of the tale from its teller, signalling a mismatch between the Wife’s position as presented in the “Prologue” and the argument of “her” narrative, which would thus expose rather than justify her stance. Ultimately, then, it would underscore the character’s textual origins, its constructedness – with perhaps a concomitant deflating effect for the issue of female sovereignty.

“The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle” has no such context that would supply additional interpretive perspectives beyond those established by the tale itself; apparently, it constitutes its own value system. The complications it offers in this regard – complications that make it more appropriate to speak of value systems in the plural – consist in its regular referencing of the customary features of what could be called the universe of popular Arthurian romance (set scenes, type characters) and the slanting which it effects in the process. The other problematizing element, often in tension with the first, is its very vocal narrator (in itself an established aspect of popular romance) who supplies his own much-biased perspective; the problem being that the bias often clashes with what the plot presents. While the tale’s Arthur may come across as a rather incompetent, flawed character, the narrator insists that he is the paragon of chivalry. Rebecca A. Davis lists other, more structural “narratorial blunders”, arguing for an overall effect and status of the tale as a parody of romance along the lines of “The Tale of Sir Thopas”, with “an inept narratorial persona designed by the poet to create humor in the manner of Chaucer’s hapless and unreliable narrators” (Davis, 431 ff). She also proposes intertextual links between the “Wedding” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, reading the former not as a debased romance catering to its audience’s taste for crude humour but as a sophisticated literary game. This is an important insight which should be kept in mind when we compare the management of the plot in the “Wedding” with the more compact versions by Gower and Chaucer. At the same time, it would be inadequate to reduce the agenda of the “Wedding” to the comedic aspect only; within that framework, it negotiates serious issues with an arguably broader outlook than either Gower’s or Chaucer’s narratives.

The Riddle of Women's Desire: Pattern of Crime and Punishment?

Perhaps because the tales, their differences notwithstanding, are still perceived as analogues, individual developments of one ancestral version, there is a tendency to reduce the string of incidents which they recount to a single symbolic pattern. We can see this in Mary Leech's assertion that the plot uniformly evolves from the male protagonist's offence and his consequent disempowerment: "Each of the knights has crossed the moral boundaries of society. To atone for this transgression, authority is taken away from the knight and put in the hands of another" (Leech, 217). The transfer of power also involves multiple inversions of established social hierarchies: a man has to submit to a woman, a sovereign to a subject, an aristocrat to a commoner (cf. Leech, 218). Though Leech focuses mostly on how this process manifests itself in the intervention of the loathly lady, it is clear that in the first instance it concerns the protagonist and the person who poses the riddle, which is apparently meant to be insoluble for the man.

Strictly speaking, this model only applies (with a minor but crucial reservation concerning the function of the riddle) to Chaucer's version of the tale. Unlike the other two texts, his narrative puts the protagonist's guilt beyond any doubt. Moreover, it is such that it makes his subsequent subjection to the will of women an especially apt reaction, introducing the theme of female sovereignty even before the test question is asked and identifying it as the central concern of the narrative (Bollard 1986, 55): "He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn, / Of whiche mayde anon, *maugree hir heed*, / By verray force he rafte hir maydenhed" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 886–88; emphasis mine). The formulation does not only identify the crime as rape, but expressly calls attention to the knight's disregard for the woman's own desires and her autonomy as a human being, which is one of the aspects of "sovereignty" (Thomas, 89) – a fact that could, but significantly does not, go without saying.

The culpable knight ends up in the jurisdiction of the Queen and her ladies; he is given the chance to avoid capital punishment if he can find an undisputed answer to what women most desire. Women determine the conditions for his survival, and this is made to depend on his ability to seriously consider not what he wants, but what they may want. Considering the act that has landed him in this situation, his chances of success would seem to be minimal, and the Queen's verdict would appear to merely make his penalty resound with a sense of poetic justice. However, it is introduced as a mitigation of the King's original strict judgment, which demanded immediate execution, in a scene that resonates with analogous cases of intervention by women in romance narratives, designed to temper justice by mercy:⁴

But that the queene and othere ladyes mo
So longe preyeden the kyng of grace,
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
And yaf hym to the queene al at hir wille,
To chese, wheither she wolde hym save or spille.
("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 894–98)

⁴ One representative example may be found in "The Knight's Tale", where the Queen and the ladies of the court plead for the lives of Palamon and Arcite, sentenced to death by Theseus (see 1742–61).

As we shall see, in the other versions the riddle is adopted as a substitute solution in circumstances which make the instant dispatching of the protagonist problematic. Here the Queen's strategy appears more ambiguous: it may admittedly be interpreted as a step which allows women in particular, not society in general, to avenge a wrong done to a woman; however, as numerous articles commenting on the matter attest,⁵ it perhaps more likely aims at the disciplining of the rapist knight in a kind of rehabilitation programme.

In "The Wife of Bath's Tale" the riddle of women's desire is formulated in the central space of the royal court, showing its programmatic focus on the issue; in the other versions, it comes to be asked in the literal and/or symbolic margin. In the "Tale of Florent", it is the balancing of the central and the liminal features of the society at the marches of the Empire where the test is designed – together with the characterisation of the protagonist – that forms a part of its meaning in the larger context of Gower's text. Although Florent, emphatically the exemplary knight,⁶ comes to the borderland territory "strange adventures forto seche" (CA, I, 1416), what he finds there is a community that knows and respects the values to which he himself adheres. However, that respect is clearly formal rather than genuine: the lord of the country does not hesitate to mount an attack on a single knight errant, capturing him and detaining him in his castle. What makes the protagonist's position precarious is the fact that, defending himself, he has killed the lord's son. Significantly, the narrative scrupulously exonerates Florent of any moral transgression: he has fought fair in an unfair fight. His opponents are torn between a savage desire for revenge and a recognition that its execution would be beyond the pale of chivalric behaviour. At this moment, the grandmother of the man killed, an old woman "the slyheste / Of alle that men knewe tho" (CA, I, 1442–43), comes to the rescue: she will turn Florent's exemplary chivalry and courtesy against him. In effect, she stages a perfect romance quest for him as a condition for his survival, confident that his regard for honour will make him accept the terms:

With that sche feigneth compaignie,
And seith: "Florent, on love it hongeth
Al that to myn axinge longeth:
What alle wommen most desire
This wole I axe, and in thempire
Wher as thou hast most knowlechinge
Tak conseil upon this axinge."
(CA, I, 1478–84)

Since the text makes clear that she relies on the effectivity of this stratagem to "bringe him inne, / That sche schal him to dethe winne" (CA, I, 1447–48), her referencing of the discourse of *fin amour* would seem to suggest an awareness – and a thematizing – of its

⁵ Recently Paul Gaffney, "Controlling the Loathly Lady, or What Really Frees Dame Ragnelle", 154, or Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty through the Lady: *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia", 76, both in S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (eds), *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales*.

⁶ Irvin classifies his characterisation – "Of armes he was desirous, / Chivalerous and amorous" (CA, I, 1413–414) – as "formulaic" (102).

schizophrenic positioning of women: ostensibly revered but ultimately objectified. In the end, Florent's performance in his quest will indicate whether the culture of the court, of which he is the representative, proves as instrumental and superficial in its approach to *courtoisie* and chivalric values as his opponents. In accordance with Gower's concerns in the *Confessio* at large, the issue of gender relationships thus metonymically reflects on problems of moral integrity in general.

If both Chaucer and Gower introduce the problem of female desire as a test that women pose to men, establishing the gender perspective as dominant from the start, the "Wedding" complicates matters by splitting both the "adventure" and the role of the protagonist between Arthur and Gawain. In the first part, Arthur, while hunting, is confronted by a man with a grudge: a knight (who, like so many antagonists in Arthurian romance, spans the insider/outsider categories in the strange mixture of savage and "civilised" behaviour, disregard of and respect for chivalric values which he exhibits; see Jost, 143–44) threatens to kill the unarmed king in revenge for what he presents as an unlawful dispossession, Arthur's abuse of the royal prerogative:

Thou hast me done wrong many a yere
And wofully I shall quytte the here;
I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done.
Thou hast gevyn my landes in certayn
With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen.
("The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle", 55–59)⁷

Apparently, the knight does not put much faith in Arthur's sense of honour, because he refuses the king's promise of redress; he does not trust the king to keep his word – rightly so, as the subsequent development makes clear. Though Arthur vows to keep their agreement secret, he needs little persuasion to confide in Gawain, implicating him in the adventure. The challenger-knight's own honour, nevertheless, proves a sufficient leverage in the king's ensuing negotiation with his opponent: Arthur manages to strike a compromise – his death warrant will be recalled if he finds the answer to the by now notorious question. This summary survey of the opening makes clear that in the case of the "Wedding", the scrutiny of existing structures of power and the society's ideas of itself does not initially entail issues of gender; what sense, then, can be made of the riddle of female sovereignty in this configuration? What makes the strange knight an authority on women's desire? Unless we dismiss this seemingly arbitrary connection as the result of an incompetent handling of the plot as it expands to incorporate the conventions of Arthurian romance, we may conclude, with Russell A. Peck, that "here women equate with the underprivileged, those dominated by patriarchal rule that abuses its privileges" (Peck, 123).

The gender perspective comes to the fore in the second part of the narrative; at its inception, however, the intended function of the riddle seems to be predicated on the understanding that Arthur will not see beyond the individual failure in his exercise of royal power (which he acknowledges) to the underlying problem. Arthur's performance

⁷ The implication of Gawain in the land dispute might indicate that the putative ancestral version of the tale, like Gower's and Chaucer's versions, could have featured a single protagonist; any speculations to that effect, however, must remain only tentative.

throughout the tale places an ironic overtone on the narrator's initial praise of the king as one who "Of alle kynges [...] berythe the flowyr, / And of alle knyghtod he bare away the honour, / Wheresoevere he went" ("Wedding", 7–9). While the protagonists of the other versions have to offer themselves to gain the answer to the riddle, Arthur has to offer Gawain. The pattern of transgression and disempowerment, detected by Leech, is limited to Arthur; as Gawain takes over, the narrative shifts to the model found in "The Tale of Florent", that of an exemplary representative of the society through whom the integrity of its values is tested.

The Woman in Charge: The Loathly Ladies

The "Wife of Bath's Tale" continues its account of the disciplining of the culprit knight as he submits to the power of the mysterious "olde wyf" who offers to help him. The characterisation of this "loathly lady", together with several specific developments which distinguish Chaucer's version of the plot from both the other narratives, underscore this function of the protagonist's experience. What sets the "wyf" apart from her counterparts is, first and foremost, the reticence in the description of her appearance: "a fouler wight ther may no man devyse" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 999) is all the text has to say in that respect. The plot, of course, cannot do without the element of her ugliness. The absence of detail, however, has two concomitant effects: first, it brings into play the problem of perception and reality which resurfaces in the final transformation scene, and second, by refusing to engage with the grotesque, it introduces the woman as an essentially dignified character and – potentially at least – a figure of authority. Paradoxically, perhaps, her status is further reinforced by her unassuming, matter-of-fact behaviour – a quiet power.

At the same time, the theme of misleading appearances resonates in the way she orchestrates her offers and demands into a lesson for the knight. Unlike the other loathly ladies, she claims no preternatural knowledge of his plight; she lets him control the situation, decide whether he will confide in her. When she professes her willingness to share her knowledge with him, to give him a definitive answer to the riddle, she does not specify her condition but asks an unnamed boon: "The nexte thyng that I requere thee, / Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 1010–1012). It is only when the knight presents his answer before the court of ladies that she reveals her meaning – "Bifor the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght, / Quod she, that thou me take unto thy wyf, / For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 1054–56). Rather than testing his *courtoisie* – for there is little to be tested – she asserts her sovereignty over him and subjects him to what amounts to a complete role reversal in what could be seen as a "socially approved", institutionalized version of the initial scenario. "The hubris of the knight's act of rape invokes the nemesis by which his own flesh is surrendered to the humiliating role of sex object" (Carter 2003, 336–37). His reaction, "For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste, / Taak al my good, and lat my body go!" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale", 1060–61), confirms that he understands the point. But he does not understand the lesson.

Gower and the "Wedding" alike place their emphases very differently from Chaucer. From the moment Gawain takes over from Arthur as the protagonist in the latter

text, these narratives agree in shaping the events that surround and follow the loathly lady's revelation of the riddle's solution as a test of the man's integrity. Nevertheless, they develop widely dissimilar strategies in approaching this task.

In contrast with the public and legal framing of Florent's initial "covenant" – the conditions of his "quest" (cf. Peck, 110–111) – his dealings with the "lothly wommannysch figure" (CA, I, 1530) are conducted strictly in private. This is a central innovation in Gower's version of the tale, allowing for a unique insight into the protagonist's thoughts in rapport with the confessional framework of the text. The terms of his agreement with the woman having been set in advance, the challenge for Florent is not just to see it through in outward conformity (his first impulse, to marry her as she demands but live separated from her, hoping for her early death), but to accept it as a set of obligations that he acknowledges internally: respect for both "thonour of wommanhiede" (CA, I, 1719) and "strengthe of matrimoine" (CA, I, 1777).

Interpreting the conceptual framework of the portrayal "of wommen [...] thunsem-lieste" (CA, I, 1625) and relating it to the substance of Florent's test is not easy. The text employs some clearly dehumanising expressions, such as "this foule grete coise" ["this foul great rump"] (CA, I, 1734); overall, however, the detailed description of the woman represents a variation on the conventional catalogue of female beauty employed in both romance and love lyric, with the individual features deformed by age. While Sarah Allison Miller has traced the connection in medieval discourses of the aged female body with ideas of monstrosity, which it embodies through its worrying dissolution of the perfectly ordered whole (Miller, 1–7), the point here seems to lie rather in the referencing of the process of idealising objectification of women in the abovementioned genres and in the discourse of *fin amour* in general. The old hag represents a challenge to that aspect of the value system which has produced Florent the perfect knight; he must resist the (unacknowledged) limitations of that system. An additional element which briefly surfaces in the description of Florent's wedding night is the switch into fabliau mode as the hag's playful behaviour replicates the derisive description of the January – May marriage (see "The Merchant's Tale", 1795–1841), a step which may be perceived as yet another way of problematising the romance framework of the tale.

Ragnelle's characterisation in the "Wedding" employs the same strategy which appears in "The Tale of Florent": her description likewise proceeds antithetically through the usual praise-list of a woman's features, but here the emphasis is placed on the animalistic and the plainly monstrous:

She had two tethe on every syde
As borys tuskes, I wolde nott hyde,
Of lengthe a large handfulle.
The one tusk went up and the other down.
A mowthe fulle wyde and fowlle igrown,
With grey herys many on.
Her lyppes laye lumpryd on her chyn;
Nek forsothe on her was none iseen –
She was a lothly on!
("Wedding", 548–56)

Leech relates her portrayal to the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque, arguing that such representation marks Ragnelle as a challenge to the society's ideas of order (Leech, 214).⁸ This interpretation agrees well with other aspects of her characterisation. Equipped as a lady, insisting on her status while behaving in an extremely unladylike fashion,⁹ she is a "social monster" (Williams-Munger, 4), an embodied boundary-crossing. This is also confirmed by the narrator's critical and mocking comments – since, as we have seen, he regularly acts as the mouthpiece of unreflected convention, here he expresses Ragnelle's status as the source of social anxiety.

With respect to Gawain, the situation in the "Wedding" represents, in a sense, the obverse of what we find in Gower's narrative. The gender perspective here produces some very unexpected positionings. Due to Arthur's role in the tale, Gawain, in effect, enters an arranged marriage with Ragnelle (Donnelly, 328). Having been introduced as the perfect knight through his role in the homosocial structures of Arthur's court, he is now paradoxically feminised. Throughout the account of the organisation of the wedding, and then of the public spectacle of the marriage ceremony and feast, he is being disposed of – silent, obedient, obliging.¹⁰ While we are made privy to everybody's feelings of disgust and unease – from Arthur through Guinevere and her ladies to the unnamed wedding guests – the only person whose thoughts are hidden from us is Gawain.¹¹ On the one hand, his reticence attests to his supreme courtesy, his acting in "thonour of wommanhiede" no matter how repulsive the individual specimen; on the other, however, the role reversal to which he is subjected is clearly also a part of the test. As in Gower, this ambiguous and contradictory positioning of both characters reveals the conflicts inherent in the value system of romance discourse.

Women's Sovereignty: The Resolutions

The protagonist's journey and its meaning – the thesis or lesson that each of the three tales presents – is completed in the scene which ends in the consummation of the marriage and its aftermath. The disciplining of the wilful knight in "The Wife of Bath's Tale", which he kept resisting for so long, has apparently proved successful; he has been made

⁸ Her analysis of the implications of portraying Ragnelle as grotesque offers numerous points of contact with Miller's study of medieval ideas of monstrosity.

⁹ Her failure to conform to the properly feminine behaviour manifests in two aspects: first, her overbearing assertiveness with which she orders everybody around, and second, her eating habits which reverse the topos of decorous table-manners as an integral part of a woman's erotic appeal, famously referenced in the portrait of the Prioress in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*.

¹⁰ Significantly, Ragnelle communicates in this matter with Arthur, not with Gawain:

"Arthoure, Kyng, lett fetche me Sir Gaweyn,
Before the knyghtes, alle in hying,
That I may now be made sekyl.
In welle and wo trowithe plyghte us togeder
Before alle thy chyvalry.
This is your graunt; lett se, have done.

Sett forthe Sir Gawen, my love, anon [...]" (525–31)

¹¹ Again, a useful point of comparison here would be the "default" distribution of roles in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale", with its focus on the knight January's desires and expectations, matched with May's silence and her role as an object acted upon; see ll. 1795–1841.

to see the error of his ways and has finally reformed. Florent and Gawain have stood the test of their courtesy and integrity and emerged the consummate specimens of virtue and chivalry they promised throughout to be. All reap their more or less well-earned reward. At the same time, this crucial moment rarely comes without an element of subversion which puts the respective lessons in question or which complicates their interpretation.

The “Tale of Florent” proves to be the least troubled in this sense. Step by step, the protagonist has subordinated his will to what he recognises as the consequences of both his pledge and (anachronistically, as the story is set in the time of Emperor Claudius) the sacrament of matrimony – till the ultimate moment of physical intimacy, which he still shuns. When his wife reminds him of his marriage vows, “he herde and understod the bond” (CA, I, 1798); he turns to face her, only to find his ugly old spouse transformed into a beautiful young lady. When – in a proper wifely manner – she respectfully wards off his embrace and announces that he has to choose between having her beautiful in the day or at night, he responds with

I not what ansuere I schal yive:
 Bot evere whil that I may live,
 I wol that ye be my maistresse [...]
 Ches for ous bothen, I you preie;
 And what as evere that ye seie,
 Riht as ye wole so wol I.
 (CA, I, 1823–31)

With that, the lady has been “mad [...] sovereign” (CA, I, 1834): not only in the sense given as the answer to the riddle of female desire (“alle wommen lievest wolde / Be sovereign of mannes love” (CA, I, 1608–1609), but also in being liberated from the constraint which her stepmother’s curse placed on her

[...] til I hadde wonne
 The love and sovereignete
 Of what knyht that in his degre
 Alle othre passeth of good name:
 And, as men sein, ye ben the same,
 The dede proeveth it is so;
 (CA, I, 1846–51)

The curse lifted, she fully regains her proper beautiful form. Gower thus brings the narrative to a close with all the plot elements integrated in a system of mutual support.¹² Florent’s aligning of his will with that of his “maistresse” concludes his test and qualifies him for the task of breaking her enchantment. The narrative also finally reconciles the potential tensions initially developed between “loves lawe” and Christian morality, as it

¹² The ending even substantiates the explanation the loathly lady appends to her assertion of sovereignty in love as the universally valid goal of female desire:
 “For what womman is so above,
 Sche hath, as who seith, al hire wille;
 And elles may sche noght fulfille
 What thing hir were lievest have.” (CA, I, 1610–1613)

brings together obedience in love and obedience to “the reule of conscience” (CA, I, 1236) and – provisionally at least – integrates the ideals of Christian marriage and of *fin amour*, purged of the contradictions in their attitude to women.

The knight in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, meanwhile, continues an extremely intrac-table learner. He resents being trapped in a marriage with someone whom he sees as so repulsive, so much his inferior: “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” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1100–1103). Although it may not be immediately clear whether his pro-fessed concern with his wife’s status is not more of a nominal grievance, added to give weight to the much more acutely felt problem of her physique, the presence of both the sensual and the “rational” objection is vital for the reading of the tale’s climactic scene. The wife states she could “amende al this” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1106) – and proceeds to take apart the knight’s complaints one by one, starting precisely with that last “rational” argument of her insufficient “gentillesse”. “He is gentil that dooth gentil dedis” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1170), she maintains: nobility proceeds from virtuous conduct, a thesis which she supports with a dazzling range of authorities, starting with the Gospel and ending with Dante. If the knight accepts her conclusions, she has not only “amended” her fault but proved herself superior to her husband; the same holds for his other objections, which are, moreover, in the last instance always related to the central idea of virtue.

Yet, after all this, the wife suddenly offers a contrary way of “amendment” – now she is willing to satisfy her husband’s “worldly appetyt” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1218). The dilemma she poses to him relates back to her “lecture”, juxtaposing virtue with sensual pleasure. More importantly, though, she offers him control not only of her looks, but of her behaviour – going a step beyond the other versions in which the choice only concerns the lady’s appearance. This large concession seems the more generous given that, unlike Ragnelle and Florent’s lady, she is not subject to any magical disfigurement imposed from the outside; the woman’s form is entirely in her own power, which she now seems to be giving up. But there is a catch: it is either her looks or her behaviour that can be to the knight’s liking – he can choose to have her old and ugly but good and obliging, or young and fair, but beyond her husband’s control. Within the *romance à thèse* framework, the optimistic reading of what follows would have the knight realise the problematic nature of his “worldly appetyt” and, recognising his wife’s superior moral stature, pass the choice to her. In this last instance, his “rehabilitation programme”, not going very well up to this point, would switch into a test which proves the protagonist has finally been reformed by his wife’s lecture: he no longer wishes to impose his will on women (Passmore, 21–23); “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie, quod she, / Syn I may chese and governe as me lest? / Ye, certes, wyf, quod he, I holde it best” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1234–36).

His pass token is what feminist readings generally renounce – instead of punishment for the rape he committed, he reaps reward for merely the faintest suggestion of improve-ment:¹³ “I wol be to yow bothe! / This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1240–41). Even if we read the wife’s obedience “in every thyng / That myghte

¹³ See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 129; Lynne Dickson, “Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*”, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 89; Hansen, “The Wife of Bath and the Mark of Adam”, 33–34.

doon hym plesance or likyng” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1255–56) as applying only to the moment when they consummate their marriage, the resolution of the tale still places his desire first, exactly where it was at the beginning. The Wife of Bath’s *thèse*, despite her apparent dissent in the Prologue, seems ultimately to endorse the patriarchal order. After all, she constructs her tale as a parallel to her account of her dealings with her last husband: there, too,

[...] with muchel care and wo,
We fille acorded by us selven two. [...]
And whan that I hadde geten unto me
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee, [...]
After that day we hadden never debaat.
God help me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde”
 (“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”, 811–24)

The net result may then seem to be the co-opting of both Alison and her tale by the existing system.

There is, however, the conventional concluding prayer (a feature appearing, for example, in the “Wedding”) that instead of sealing that closure shows the Wife blithely ignoring both the moral dimension of her own tale and its resolution – the mutuality which ultimately reinstates masculine “sovereynetee”:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parfit joye;-and Jesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, fressh abedde,
And grace toverbyde hem that we wedde.
 (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, 1257–60)

This epilogue ironically replays Alison’s manipulations of “auctoritee” in her Prologue and ultimately points to the impossibility of controlling the meaning of any text.

The climactic scene and its aftermath in the “Wedding” continues to work with the gender reversals and the confrontation of homosocial and heterosexual relationships introduced in the preceding section of the narrative. Gawain’s marriage to Ragnelle has been presented as his fulfilling of a pledge given not to her but to Arthur;¹⁴ it is a commonly held view that, when it comes to the moment when Gawain should perform his marital duty, he only offers to do so when his wife reminds him of his obligation to his king (Caldwell, 247; Leech, 224): “[...] for Arthours sake kysse me att the leste; [...] Sir Gawen sayd, ‘I wolle do more / Then for to kysse, and God before!’” (“Wedding”, 637–39). Yet this is dubious, at the very least, for Ragnelle also appeals to Gawain’s respect for his marriage vows – and for her own wishes: “A, Sir Gawen, syn I have you wed, / Shewe me your cortesy in bed; / With ryghte itt may nott be denyed” (“Wedding”, 629–31) – “I pray you do this att my request” (Wedding”, 636). The point seems to lie precisely in the juxtaposition of these two kinds of commitment, which at this moment are working towards

¹⁴ “Syr, I am redy of *that I you hyghte*, / Alle forwardes to fulfylle” (“Wedding”, 534–35; emphasis mine).

the same end but which will be placed in opposition in the dilemma that the lady poses to Gawain: he can have her beautiful during the day for everybody to see, or at night for his private enjoyment. The first option would make her “the perfect trophy wife” (Bugge 2004, 205), a currency in Gawain’s homosocial relations; the second prioritises the heterosexual liaison.

Of all the protagonists, Gawain goes the furthest in his respect for and deference to Ragnelle. Still playing the woman’s role in traditional marriage, he does not only acknowledge her sovereignty, but places himself entirely in her power: “Bothe body and goodes, hartt, and every dele, / Ys alle your oun, for to by and selle – / That make I God avowe!” (“Wedding”, 682–84). This breaks Ragnelle’s curse, and she fully recovers her true form. She also recovers her properly feminine attitude: no longer the bossy shrew, she publicly vows obedience to Gawain the following morning. He, in turn, promises her his love in what appears to be a secular version of the medieval marriage ceremony, with its different injunctions for the husband (“to love and to cherish” his spouse) and the wife (“to love, cherish, and to obey” hers) (“The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” [from the *Sarum Missal*], 375). Such a resolution seems to leave no space for subversion; once evil has been defeated through Gawain’s exemplary chivalry, everybody settles comfortably into their proper gender roles and order is restored with congratulations and reconciliations on all sides, including the disgruntled knight, Ragnelle’s brother.

One thing, however, remains unreconciled: Gawain’s homosocial and heterosexual bonds. Even in his first confrontation with Arthur the morning after the wedding night, he displays a so far unprecedented independence. When the king bids him get up, he retorts: “[...] Sir Kyng, sicurly, / I wold be glad, and ye wold lett me be, / For I am fulle welle att eas” (“Wedding”, 733–35). This sets the key for his subsequent neglect of his knightly duties, when “as a coward” he stays at home with his wife and stops frequenting tournaments, which somewhat nettles Arthur. The ending thus problematises the possibility of harmonising individual aspects of both the romance discourse and the patriarchal order. Ultimately, this tension has to be violently eliminated by Ragnelle’s untimely death, summarily presented by the narrator in his role as the mouthpiece of conventional perspective (cf. Leech, 225–27).

In each of the three tales, the theme of female sovereignty initiates a complex exploration of society’s ideas of appropriate gender roles and of the social and conceptual orders into which they fit. Moreover, the narratives often use gender terms to comment on various concepts of hierarchy in general: in Chaucer, the contestation of power between genders occasions a discussion of the foundations of social rank and their validity; the splitting of the protagonist role and the quest in the “Wedding”, together with its thematising of the social marginalisation of the heroine, suggest that it uses women partly as a figure for the disempowered in general. The texts also negotiate the limits of the generic framework in which they operate and of the value system which it embodies. The “Wedding” parodies the conventions of popular romance, but it goes beyond just a literary game in the way it exposes the tensions between the constituent aspects of the concepts of chivalry and *courtoisie*. In his rendering of the tale, Gower allusively comments on the internal contradictions within the concept of *fin amour* so central to romance, its critique opening the way for an appeal to Christian morality as a superior system. Here,

at this early point in the *Confessio Amantis* project, *caritas* comes to the rescue of *amor* and romance is saved, though at a price. The lecture on true gentility in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” would seem to point to a similar concern with morality and a questioning of the romance genre on Chaucer’s part, but the inconsistencies in the narrative voice as well as in the narrator’s stance in what is ostensibly a vindication of her argument in the “Prologue” show that, exactly like the Prologue, the text brings to the fore the problems of representation and construction of meaning in general. Admittedly, each in its own way, the tales tend toward a closure that affirms existing social and discursive structures; however, what they ultimately show, in their various loose ends and/or more or less violent checks, is that such closure cannot really be sustained.

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RÉSUMÉ:

DÁMY ŠEREDY A JEJICH PONAUCENÍ: ZKOUMÁNÍ GENDEROVÝCH STRUKTUR V „POVÍDCE O FLORENTOVÍ“, „POVÍDCE ŽENY Z BATHU“ A „SVATBĚ PANA GAWAINA A PANÍ RAGNELLE“

Tři pozdně středověké anglické texty, Gowerova Povídka o Florentovi, Chaucerova Povídka ženy z Bathu a anonymní rytířský román Svatba pana Gawaina a paní Ragnelle, opakovaně konfrontují svého hrdinu s otázkou ženské touhy. V každém z ústředních bodů zápletky protagonista musí vzít na vědomí suverenitu žen, ve dvojím významu autonomie a moci. Mohlo by se tedy zdát, že jejich smyslem je kritika ustáleného soudobého pojetí genderových rolí; bližší analýza toho, jak se téma rozvíjí v obměnách základní zápletky každého z textů, však ukazuje, že jejich postoj je komplexnější a odhaluje spíše napětí mezi různými modely postavení žen i mužů koexistujícími v dané kultuře. Zároveň popis boje o suverenitu mezi pohlavími slouží i k ohledávání jiných druhů sociální hierarchie a pojetí moci. Texty konečně zkoumají také hranice žánru, v jehož prostoru se pohybují, a jeho hodnotový systém.

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