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ing of English. There is no better way to summarize my remarks tonight than to consider the spirit of self-analysis so ably said by Robert Frost in "Two Tramps in Mud Time." Frost found himself splitting wood. Two tramps came along and wanted the job. Frost considered the day and the attitude of the lumberjacks and concluded:

Nothing on either side was said,
They knew they had but to stay their stay,
And all their logic would fill my head:
As if I had no right to play

With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right—agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation with my vocation,
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and for future's sakes.⁴

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The Converted Knight in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale"

JOSEPH P. ROPPOLO¹

SCHOLARS, almost without exception, have treated the story told by the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* as merely a fairy tale, an exemplum designed to illustrate the Wife's belief that happiness in marriage can be achieved only if the wife is granted sovereignty. In studies made from this point of view, emphasis falls naturally and obviously upon the Hag, and the story is known generally as the story of the Loathly Lady. It is possible, however, that Chaucer is here telling two stories simultaneously—two stories which merge in surface detail but which diverge in moral preachment with strongly ironic effect; for the "Wife of Bath's Tale" is not merely the account of an amazingly ugly woman who, by magic, becomes beautiful. It is also the story of the change which occurs in a selfish, proud, and morally blind knight who is taught to find beauty and worth in wisdom and purity. Through such an interpretation,

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the Knight gains importance, scenes hitherto considered little more than digressions become meaningful and essential parts of the tale as a whole, and the complex character of the Wife of Bath, already plentifully revealed in the "General Prologue" and in her own "Prologue," is shown in consistent and appropriate action.

The Knight, then, is the major problem here. In the search for light on his character, let us turn first to the scholars who have treated the "Wife of Bath's Tale." From the point of view of this paper, these treatments fall into three groups: those which show almost complete disregard for the Knight; those which make generalizations concerning the Knight; and those in which some analysis of the Knight's role appears.

When the "Wife of Bath's Tale" is examined as merely the story of the Loathly Lady, there is little room for disagreement on two points: it is a fairy story, and it is an exemplum demonstrat-

ing the Wife's thesis of sovereignty. The Hag and the Wife of Bath become the two characters of major importance, and the Knight is almost a mechanical instrument used for purposes of plot. Lowes, Chute, Maynadier, Root, Legouis, and Margaret Schlauch are in accord on these points and belong in the category of those critics who show almost complete disregard for the Knight. Chute summarizes this attitude: "The text of the Wife of Bath is that women shall have full sovereignty in marriage, and her delightful fairy tale is merely to illustrate the point."²

In the second category—generalizations concerning the Knight—are the comments of Lounsbury, Tupper, Kittredge, Patch, Curry, and Mrs. Dempster. Lounsbury, for example, in his *Studies in Chaucer*, finds the Wife's tale "full of wisest observation, of keenest insight into character and motive," but he does not discuss the characterization and motivation of the Knight.³ Tupper calls the "Wife of Bath's Tale" a "pride tale," but his emphasis falls on the sermon on gentillesse rather than on the person to whom it is directed.⁴ Kittredge sees the sermon as "a definite part of the dramatic plan" of the tale, but he is speaking of the Wife of Bath, not the Knight, for he adds that "the sermon or curtain lecture is in perfect accord with the

worthy Wife's own argumentative habits."⁵ Mrs. Dempster seems to sense an emphasis on the Knight's character in the sermon, but she dismisses it as unwarranted: the Hag is trying to prove that she belongs in the ranks of the truly noble; "with the Knight's nobility, true or false, she should not be more concerned than with his being or not being rich," Mrs. Dempster concludes.⁶

Among those who give some analysis of the Knight's role are Kenyon, Coffman, and Huppé. Kenyon, in his discussion of the word "thy" in the sermon, comes close to giving the Knight his due. He argues that the Lady is making "a telling personal application" to the Knight, for "the matter of rank was the most important of the Knight's objections."⁷ Coffman goes a little further. Through the sermon, he says, "the baseness of the Knight's act, by implication, becomes apparent."⁸ Huppé, in a recent article concentrated on the rape scene, does much to focus attention on the Knight, but he is limited by his subject. He is concerned with the Knight's "inner convictions" on the question of sovereignty, and he argues that the answer to the Queen's question, supplied by the Loathly Lady, is not sufficient to change the Knight's character. "That is why," he says, "in the logic of the Wife's exemplum the setting of the dilemma by

² Marchette Chute, *Geoffrey Chaucer of England* (1946), p. 278. See also John Livingston Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of His Genius* (1934), p. 224; G. H. Maynadier, *The Wife of Bath's Tale, Its Sources and Analogues* (1901), p. 137; Robert Kilburn Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer* (1934), pp. 238 and 241; Émile Hyacinthe Legouis, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, trans. Louis Lailavoix (1913), p. 159; and Margaret Schlauch, "The Marital Dilemma in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *PMLA*, LXI (1946), 418.

³ Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer* (1892), III, 417-18.

⁴ Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," *PMLA*, XXIX (1914), 100-101.

⁵ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (1920), p. 25.

⁶ Germaine Dempster, "'Thy Gentillesse' in *Wife of Bath's Tale*," D 1159-62," *MLN*, LVII (1942), 173. See also Howard Rollin Patch, *On Rereading Chaucer* (1939), p. 223, and Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (1926), p. 113, and "More about Chaucer's Wife of Bath," *PMLA*, XXXVII (1922), 49.

⁷ John S. Kenyon, "Wife of Bath's Tale 1159-62," *MLN*, LIV (1939), 135-36.

⁸ George R. Coffman, "Chaucer and Courtly Love, Once More—'The Wife of Bath's Tale,'" *Speculum*, XX (1945), 49.

the loathly lady becomes necessary; when the Knight . . . admits from within himself the sovereignty of women—then and only then is he truly blessed.”⁹ Implied here are some of the arguments which will be discussed later in a detailed analysis of the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” itself.

Before turning to the tale, however, let us look briefly at analogues gathered for it. These analogues, we shall see, tend to minimize the Knight’s importance in that they do not exhibit his conversion. Because of the faery elements and the setting in King Arthur’s court, a Celtic origin in an Irish folk tale has been claimed for Chaucer’s story.¹⁰ The Chaucer Society published numerous analogues, but only three combine the story of the Loathly Lady with the story of the man whose life depends on the correct answer to a question. These three are Gower’s “Tale of Florent” and two ballads, “The Marriage of Sir Gawaine” and “The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell.”¹¹ In Gower’s tale the motive for the quest is blood-revenge for a murder. In the two ballads King Arthur is in danger, and Gawaine becomes involved with the Loathly Lady in his attempts to save the life of his sovereign. In all three analogues the aura of enchantment is stronger than it is in Chaucer’s story; in all three a stepmother’s curse is responsible for the Loathly Lady’s hideousness; and in all three the Lady’s recovery of her natural youth and beauty is con-

tingent upon her marriage to a perfect knight who will give her love and sovereignty.

It is obvious that Chaucer’s story does not parallel the analogues closely. Chaucer has made extensive changes, and frequently the change clearly affects the character and motivation of the Knight. In the three analogues the reasons for which a perfect knight embarks upon a quest are altruistic rather than personal; in Chaucer’s tale the Knight is a rapist who is sent upon a quest in order to save his own life. In the analogues the knight marries the Loathly Lady willingly; in Chaucer’s tale the Knight marries the Hag unwillingly and behaves ungraciously toward her. Chaucer makes King Arthur a minor character and does not include a stepmother’s curse. Also, Chaucer obviously plays down the faery element. As Lounsbury points out, “Chaucer gives in fact such an air of verisimilitude that we accept all the impossibilities as occurrences naturally to be expected.”¹² The only definite supernatural elements are the Wife’s opening mention of “fayerye”¹³ (859) in the days of King Arthur (a satiric thrust at the Friar), the disappearance of the four and twenty “and yet mo” (992) dancing ladies in the forest, the Hag’s knowledge of the Knight’s quest, and the transformation of the Loathly Lady at the end of the story.

Thus, though scholars have treated the story as a fairy-tale exemplum, comparison of Chaucer’s version with its analogues shows that he actually subordinated the supernatural. We must, there-

⁹ Bernard F. Huppé, “Rape and Woman’s Sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” *MLN*, LXIII (1948), 381.

¹⁰ Robert Dudley French, *A Chaucer Handbook* (1947), p. 279. See also Lowes, *op. cit.*, p. 225, and W. W. Skeat, *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1894-97), V, 313.

¹¹ French, *op. cit.*, p. 279, and W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (eds.), *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (1941), pp. 223-64.

¹² *Op. cit.*, III, 340.

¹³ Middle English quotations are from F. N. Robinson’s edition of *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1933). J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert’s *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (1940) shows no important differences.

fore, choose between two possible critical conclusions: either Chaucer, in retelling the story of the Loathly Lady, failed, because of omissions and interpolations, to tell a tightly woven, compact, and skilful tale, or Chaucer made selective use of the elements of the older stories in telling a story of his own, in which all the elements have a place, even such elements as the initial rape scene, the Midas story, and the sermon on gentillesse. Many critics hold the former view. For example, Sedgwick describes the Hag's sermon on the essentials of a gentleman as not pertinent and says that "the story is hardly in keeping with what we know" of the Wife.¹⁴ Kittredge calls the Wife's tale an "episodical romance" and argues that Chaucer digressed in pausing to tell the tale of Midas' ears instead of making a simple allusion to it.¹⁵ However, in accepting the second alternative, our purpose here is to shift emphasis from the Loathly Lady to the Knight and thus to show the functional nature of the so-called digressions and inconsistencies in the story.

First of all, we note that the Knight is morally corrupt or, at best, youthfully blind and not at all typical of the Knights of the Round Table, as exemplified by King Arthur and Gawaine. The opening scene, in which the Knight finds a maiden walking all alone and rapes her "by verray force" (888), reveals him as selfish and lustful, a man easily aroused by surface beauty and determined to satisfy his lusts without consideration of the cost to his victim or to himself. Courtly love interpretations of this scene are not necessarily destroyed if we accept it as character revelation. It may perhaps be true that under the courtly love system

knights had no great regard for the chastity of peasant girls, but it should be pointed out also that nowhere does Chaucer say that the girl is a peasant; he stresses instead the fact that the Knight belongs to the court of King Arthur, a court noted for its kindness to *all* women, and he makes it clear that the Knight committed a crime for which he must pay with his life.¹⁶ It becomes apparent, too, that Chaucer means to center attention on the Knight, for he dismisses the maiden, although in some of the analogues she is a beautiful girl who becomes the Loathly Lady and the heroine.

That the Knight is a favorite with the ladies, who know and condone his faults, is evident immediately after the opening scene. It is the Queen who intercedes for the Knight—the Queen and "othere ladyes mo" (894)—and the pleas continue for so long a period that King Arthur is finally overwhelmed. When the Queen is granted the right to decide whether the Knight shall live or die, she is so pleased that she thanks the King "with al hir myght" (899). Even the task which the Queen assigns to the erring Knight is appropriate: to discover what thing it is that women most desire is exactly the right project to remove some of the conceit from a male who perhaps believed himself to be the answer to that question. The question is also evidence of the Queen's regard for the Knight: the task is neither fearful nor bloody but may well be woman's chastisement of the rogue male. It is true that, should he fail in the quest, the Knight must forfeit his life; but the problem does not arise. The seriousness of the quest is important for

¹⁴ Henry Dwight Sedgwick, *Dan Chaucer* (1934), pp. 292, 293.

¹⁵ Kittredge, *op. cit.*, pp. 17, 23.

¹⁶ For varying arguments on the problem raised here see Coffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45, 46; Huppé, *op. cit.*, pp. 379, 380; Patch, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-22; Frederick Tupper, *Types of Society in Medieval Literature* (1926), p. 157; and C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), p. 35.

suspense and serves also to reveal more facets of the Knight's character. That he places great value upon his life is shown by the earnestness with which he seeks the answer to the Queen's question; that he values life above honor is shown in his dealings with the Loathly Lady. He promises the Hag anything if she will show him how to save himself; then, once saved, he begs for release from his promise. When the Hag reminds him that he pledged himself to marry her, he cries out: "Allas! and weylaway! / I woot right wel that swich was my biheste. / For Goddess love, as chees a newe requeste! / Taak al my good, and lat my body go" (1058-61). The Hag is adamant, and the Knight is literally forced to marry her. At no point, though, does he show resignation or courtesy or even the sportsmanship of a good loser. His reaction to the Hag before the wedding, when she asserts that all she desires is to be his wife and his love, is violent and cruel. "My love?" he says, "nay, my dampnacioun! / Allas! that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!" (1067-69). The marriage is private, and the Knight "al day after hidde hym as an owle, / So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule" (1081-82). On the wedding night so great is the wound to the Knight's vanity that he not only ignores his marital duties but even chides the Lady brutally for being loathly, old, and of "so lough a kynde" (1100-1101).

Up to this point, the Knight's character is anything but admirable. To deserve the coming happy ending, the Knight must change. Actually, he does change; but there is no magic. The change is brought about by the Loathly Lady's lecture on true gentillesse. She points out forcefully that true gentillesse comes from Christ and is an attribute not of the nobly born alone but of any person

who lives properly. She shows that poverty and low caste are not necessarily a disgrace but may, on the contrary, engender rich virtues; and she even argues that age and ugliness may be guardians of purity and therefore blessed. These Boethian arguments are the Hag's defense of herself; they are also her attack upon the characteristics which keep the Knight from being truly noble. Their prime purpose is to work a sort of magic in the Knight, to transform him; and the magic is potent. Root comments: "We are held captive by the spell of [the Lady's] poetry, and at the conclusion of the speech are not surprised to find that the speaker is of wondrous beauty."¹⁷ If such magic has the power to charm the reader, why should it not charm the Knight?

It is perhaps surprising that the impatient, discourteous, and unhappy Knight listened to the Lady's long lecture, but Chaucer gives ample motivation for alert attention: the Lady, before she begins the sermon, has made clear that she "koude amende al this"—*if* the Knight will listen to her (1106-7). The Knight certainly wishes to hear any possible way out of his unfortunate marriage. Perhaps he continues to listen because the sermon makes sense, and what he hears demolishes every objection he has to his new wife. At any rate, he is converted. At this point the fairy-exemplum element returns; the Lady gives the Knight his choice of having her old and ugly but faithful, or young and fair and perhaps unfaithful—a Chaucerian change of the older dilemma, again emphasizing character. The Knight's answer has been interpreted by some as sarcasm, but as sarcasm its effect is lessened by the Knight's deliberation. The Knight thinks his problem over care-

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

fully, seeking a way out. "But atte laste he seyde in this manere: / 'My lady and my love, and wyf so deere, / I put me in youre wise governance; / Cheseth youreself . . ." (1229-32). "My lady and my love, and wife so dear . . .": these are the terms he applies to the Loathly Lady after her sermon on gentillesse and *before* her transformation. It is important to note that not until she is assured of sovereignty does the Lady say she will be young, fair, and true; and not until his conversion is complete does the Knight perform the symbolic act of drawing aside the curtains to let in light which reveals that the Lady is in truth young and fair.

Through this emphasis on the Knight's importance in the Wife's "Tale," two major problems have been solved. First, the rape scene is now meaningful in two respects: the Knight's character is revealed, and also in this scene the Wife of Bath takes the first long step toward demonstrating her thesis that sovereignty should rest with the wife, for rape necessitates domination, and certainly it is a crime against female sovereignty. Fittingly, the punishment for this crime is determined by the Queen, who in this instance dominates her husband. Second, according to this interpretation, the sermon on gentillesse is not a digression; rather it is the turning point of the story. As a result of the sermon, the Knight is converted; and through the sermon the transformation of the Loathly Lady becomes double-edged. The Hag's change may be magical, necessary to the happy ending of a fairy story; or perhaps the change occurs only in the mind of the Knight: with his new vision, the same Lady who seemed foul and old and of "low kynde" is, in her wisdom and faith and purity, young and beautiful and worthy of his love.

Two other problems remain. Is the Midas story unskilful interpolation, or does it serve a vital purpose? And does the stressing of women's sovereignty throughout the Wife's tale negate the possibility that the change in the Knight is of importance, or can it be shown that both the sovereignty of women and the conversion of the Knight are vital elements of the story that Chaucer wished to tell?

It becomes essential here, in considering these two problems, to emphasize the fact that not Chaucer but the Wife of Bath tells the tale of the Loathly Lady. Through the "Tale," Chaucer is skilfully continuing the process of character revelation that was begun in the Wife's "Prologue." It will be remembered that the Wife has had opportunity to learn many beautiful and delicate tales and many wise and learned stories and arguments from her fifth husband, the cleric. She likes, remembers, and uses them; but she is not above altering a story for her own purposes, as the so-called Midas digression shows. Chaucer knew, certainly, that in Ovid's story it was Midas' barber who whispered the secret of Midas' ears to a hole in the ground. To demonstrate woman's inability to keep a secret, Alison changes the barber into a woman, Midas' wife.¹⁸ Here we clearly see that the Wife of Bath knows the old tales and will alter them for her own purposes. May she not also alter the story of the Knight and the Loathly Lady to suit her own purposes, to demonstrate her theme

¹⁸ The Midas story may be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* xi, and it is quoted in *Sources and Analogues*, p. 265. Skeat comments that Chaucer "seems to have purposely altered the story" and that "Chaucer's version is an improved one" (*op. cit.*, p. 317). Root suggests that the Wife of Bath learned the Midas story "doubtlessly from husband number five" (*op. cit.*, p. 242), and Edgar Finley Shannon, in *Chaucer and the Roman Poets* (1929), pp. 318-19, speculates that it was Jankin who changed the story.

that sovereignty should rest with the wife? The abrupt termination of the Midas story ("If you want the rest of it, read Ovid," the Wife of Bath says [981-82]) shows us that Chaucer realizes that the remainder of the story is not pertinent; it would, in fact, constitute a real digression, but that part of the Midas story which is included serves a real purpose in the whole tale.

Knowing that Alisoun will alter details of a story to achieve her own ends, and that she tells her tale to demonstrate that women should have sovereignty over their husbands, we expect her to reveal her bias in the moral of the Loathly Lady story, even if she completely misses or submerges the true moral. She does just that. Sovereignty becomes her principal point, and she demonstrates it consistently in the rape scene, through the Queen's actions, and through the Loathly Lady. Submerged, but visible, is the Knight's story, which

points a different moral: that true gentillesse comes from God alone and brings with it an awareness of moral worth and beauty. We should not fail to note the ironic fact that the Wife of Bath cannot qualify under her own definition of gentillesse.

The present analysis of the "Wife of Bath's Tale" does not exclude the generally accepted interpretations. The tale is a fairy story, it is an exemplum, and it does demonstrate the Wife's thesis on sovereignty. My only claim here is that another layer of meaning exists in the "Tale," for, in addition to the story of the Loathly Lady, we have found the story of the Converted Knight. And this new emphasis on the Knight should not surprise us, for Alisoun herself speaks of him as the character "of which my tale is specially" (983).¹⁹

¹⁹ I am indebted to Professor R. M. Lumiansky for assistance in preparing this paper.

The Early Critical Work of T. S. Eliot *An Assessment*

RUTH C. CHILD¹

Now that some thirty years of controversy have passed, it is possible to consider the early critical work of T. S. Eliot in fair perspective and to attempt an assessment both of its values and of its limitations. Though the uncollected essays and the later collected essays have their importance, the major influence stems from the handful of essays published in 1920 as *The Sacred Wood* and the three critiques collected in 1924 under the title *Homage to John Dryden*.

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These two small volumes brought much that was new to English criticism and contained all of Eliot's significant contributions to critical theory. By the early thirties they had been widely read, studied, and quoted. In view of the subsequent fame of this early criticism, its limitations may appear surprising. And, in view of its limitations, its influence has been extraordinary.

When *The Sacred Wood* appeared in 1920, neohumanism was well under way. *Rousseau and Romanticism* had been pub-