

Chaucer, Gower, and What Medieval Women Want

Peter Chiykowski

*Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower, friends and colleagues, both chose to retell the same story at roughly the same time in their story collections, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis*. We can imagine a bet or a friendly competition of some sort between the two writers over who could make the most ingenious transformation of a traditional folktale, *The Loathly Lady* story – although sadly no account survives to prove they wrote the stories in competition with each: The story they chose for their source is of a young knight who is sent to find out “what women want” as punishment for some transgression, and who ends up marrying an ugly old hag to discover the answer. That answer is, of course, “sovereignty” or to do what they please. In Gower’s version, the hag then gives the knight the traditional fairy-tale choice, whether he would have her beautiful by day and ugly by night, or vice versa. Chaucer, however, mixes things up a little, and the choice becomes a much more loaded one: whether the knight would have his wife be beautiful and unfaithful or ugly and chaste.*

Peter Chiykowski’s essay clearly shows the gendered concerns underlying these choices: both the choices the knights within the story make, and these choices: both the choices the knights within the story make, and the choices the two authors make in constructing their tales. Using the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism and multi-voicedness, Chiykowski argues that Chaucer’s version opens up many more possibilities for women and women’s voices than Gower’s version does.

-Dr. Kathleen Cawsey

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and John Gower’s *Tale of Florent* both draw on the tradition of Celtic loathly lady tales, though each express subtly different narrative conclusions. The *Wife’s Tale* includes new avenues for feminine discourse by embellishing the roles of female characters. In contrast to its monologic counterpart in Gower, the *Wife’s Tale* contains moments of both masculine and feminine discourse. Ultimately this dialogism changes both the knight’s and the reader’s awareness of medieval gender discourse as the story progresses. In contrast to the *Wife’s* knight, Florent is tested but essentially unchanged by his experience with the hag, and the overarching virtue of the tale is masculine obedience, not feminine sovereignty. Though there is plenty of debate over whether the final arrangement between the *Wife’s* knight and the hag is feminist or anti-feminist, “hard” or “soft,” when compared to its analogue in the *Confessio Amantis*, the *Tale* makes undeniable advances toward a proto-feminist marriage ideal. Chaucer distinguishes his dialogic *Tale* from Gower’s exemplary *Tale of Florent* by demonstrating a change in the knight’s understanding of gender dynamics.

Establishing the *Wife’s Tale* as an analogue of Gower’s text is not especially relevant to founding it as a proto-feminist text, but it does help place Chaucer’s understanding of gender discourse in context. In his edition of the *Confessio Amantis*, Henry Morley claims the *Tale of Florent* was [u]sed by Chaucer as his *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,”¹ implying Chaucer treated it as a source. In their compilation of Chaucerian criticism, however, Beidler and Beibel cite a slew of critics, Whitley Stokes, F. Görbing,

Henry Seidel Canby, Laura Sumner, Bartlett J. Whiting, Robert Dudley French, and Russel A. Peck, who suggest that both tales draw from a common source, most likely the Celtic loathly lady tales in which the pater of the hero's redemption quest and subsequent debt to the hag is recurrent.² Gower certainly does not claim to have invented this when he writes about how the tale was passed down: "And clerkés that this chaucé herde/ They written it in evidence."³ Whether or not Chaucer made his extensive innovations based on the original Celtic stories or Gower's version, however, the effect is still the same. He took a notably anti-feministic story tradition – that is, a tradition containing "satirical caricatures of women," in this case the lustful old hag – and innovated a Tale with a developed version of that character.⁴

We can contrast Gower's monologic discourse, the kind that powers an *exemplum*, and Chaucer's dialogic (and relatively progressive) discourse as a basis for examining the unnamed knight's social education. The most evident case of this contrast is in Chaucer and Gower's methods of characterization. In Gower, only four characters are identified by name or title: Florent, Branchus, the Captain, and the King of Cecile. All are men. Furthermore, the only two female characters in the tale are expressed in terms of their relation to these men, the hag because she is "the kingés doughter of Cecile,"⁵ and the woman who gives Florent his quest because she is "grauntdamé to the dede [Branchus]."⁶ In contrast, Chaucer has no named or titled characters other than the queen and king, and he thus avoids the problem of characterizing his female characters by their relationships to men. Gower's women are cast in masculine terms before they can become characters, while Chaucer's characters come without presuppositions to the social or narrative importance of the various voices.

This Chaucerian dialogism persists in the pinnacle plot points as well, as early as the knight's crime. The rhyme couplet from the rape scene, "Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force berafte hire maydenhed,"⁷ reinforces the reading that the knight's crime constitutes a violation of not just feminine virtue ("maydenhed") but also feminine will and sovereignty ("heed"). The rape itself is a conflict of medieval associations of masculine force and feminine chastity. In Gower, the crime is committed by one man against another; Florent kills Branchus. His crime never allows for the entrance of feminine discourse because it does not violate the ideal of feminine sovereignty. It, in fact, violates the masculine ideal of primogeniture. He kills Branchus, "whiche to the Captian/ Was sone and heire."⁸ The knight's offense is expressed as a transgression of male inheritance law, a specific kind of masculine legal discourse.

The first instance of a female voice in Gower is Branchus' grandmother who represents inheritance law, which is generally a masculine discourse because the right to judge Florent passes down to her as the eldest of the bloodline. She is described as, "So olde she might unnethés go."⁹ Her age further defeminizes her. Beyond the fact that her bloodline is what determines her sovereignty, her judgment is further dwarfed by masculine inheritance discourse; she must be lenient toward Florent because of "how he st[ands] of cousinage/ To thempourer."¹⁰ In Chaucer, the king "yaf him [the knight] to the queene al at hir wille" in passing judgment.¹¹ It is quite clear that the knight's crime against women can only be fittingly punished by women. While the queen's right to

judge depends on the king's permission, it still casts the knight's crime as a gender conflict, and thus a dialogic conflict constituted of conflicting gendered voices. Furthermore, the court that judges the knight's answer later in the text is not constituted by just the queen, but by all women. After the knight gives his answer to the redemption quest, the Wife of Bath describes that "in al the court ne was ther wyf ne mayde/Ne wydwe that contraried that he saide."¹² The knight is judged by all the women of the court.

How the tales' interests differ is also made evident in how the knight's quest is framed. When Florent is sent out, there is emphasis placed on what he already knows; the grandmother tells him to look "in th'empire/Wher as thou hast most knowleching."¹³ This task is a test of his knightly knowledge. The Wife's knight is not complimented for what he knows already, simply sent off to "to seche and leere"¹⁴ for a year and a day with a reminder that his body is forfeit.¹⁵ The Wife's knight is reminded of his submission to the court of ladies before his quest even begins, where Florent is lauded for his worldliness, and thus subtly reminded that he is not subordinate to the will of the woman judging him.

There is an audible contrast of discourses in the answers that the knights find during their quests. In the *Tale of Florent*, the entirety of Florent's discovery is summarized by the line: "The wisest of the londe assent,/But nethées of one assent/They mighté nought accordé plat."¹⁶ There is no implication that any of "the wisest of the londe" are women, and the passage is spoken by the male narrative voice. In contrast, Chaucer invents a lengthy passage that details what women desire, and uses many different voices filtered through both his and the Wife's narrative voice.¹⁷ This simultaneous harmony and cacophony of voices is typical of the complicated discourse dynamic that propels the Tale.

This dialogism persists even in the knight's promise to the hag. In Chaucer, the knight first sees the hag as "ladyes foure and twenty and yet mo" who suddenly vanish and become one person.¹⁸ The hag is thus defined both by her multiplicity and unity; she represents all women through the vision of her multiple selves, and the singular ideal of woman through her independence of relationships with men and her unifying ideal of sovereignty. In contrast, the first and largest part of Gower's description is the hag's anti-effictio, in which she is not described as a representative of femininity, but as creature that specifically repulses men: "Her necke is short, her shulders courbe,/That might a *mannés* lust distourbe."¹⁹ While Chaucer's hag exercises the sovereignty principle by mastering the knight through the promise, "The nexte thing that I require thee,/Thou shalt it do if it lye in thy might," Gower's hag presents a choice which stresses the male character's sovereignty.²⁰ Florent knows his options. He must choose "one of the two - /Or for to take her to is wife/Or ellés for to lese his life," and thus the decisive moment of the text is expressed as the masculine dilemma.²¹ It is a test of the patriarchal values of honour and obedience. In Chaucer, this scene is framed as a gender confrontation, pitting a man's honour against a woman's sovereignty. The knight is compelled in the way that most knights are, and must finish his quest to confirm his masculine chivalric identity, while the hag overturns his power with her awareness of feminine.

With a firm foundation in Chaucer's dialogism and Gower's monologism, we can now see how the Wife's knight is informed by the female discourse with which he is in conflict, while Florent remains unchanged in a narrative dominated by the masculine voice. Chaucer introduces the knight simply as "a lusty bachelor" before moving on to the true point of character revelation: the rape.²² At the beginning he is entirely insensitive to feminine discourse. Indeed, the maid he violates has no voice. The story is a process of formation for him. In contrast, Florent enters the story exactly as he leaves it. In the brief *effictio* that Gower writes, we see that Florent already has all the qualities of the courtly hero: "He was a man that muchel might./Of armes he was desirous,/Chiválerous and amorous."²³ Gower's tale is thus an *exemplum* which tests Florent's obedience rather than develops it.

As such, all the plot points where the Wife's knight is challenged and must be guided by women are points at which Florent simply demonstrates qualities of prudence and obedience he already possessed. Gower writes that Florent bargains briefly with the hag before assenting to marriage, "Florent behight her good ingouh/Of lond, of rent, of parke, of plough,/But all that compteth she at nought,"²⁴ but after he has made his promise he is fully obedient to his promise. Perhaps his only unheroic moment is when he rationalizes, "That she was of so great an age/That she may live but awhile."²⁵ In contrast, Chaucer furnishes us with multiple passages of the knight's protest, showing that his statement to the court of women when he says "Dooth as yow list. I am at youre wille," is just a pretense of submission. Feminine agency in the Tale has made him both aware of, though not yet sensitive to, feminine sovereignty discourse.²⁶ In the knight's most ironic moment of protest, "Taak al my good, and lat my body go!" he is actually trading discourses with the hag.²⁷ She adopts the masculine legal discourse to demand that his promise be upheld, and he echoes the cry of the rape victim, asking that his riches be taken instead of his body. The dialogic dynamic transforms both his associated role and his associated values. By the time of the bedroom scene, the Wife's knight has gone from being obedient in word and being obedient in deed, though he has yet to be obedient in spirit. He submits himself to the situation, although he continues to passively resist: "he turn[s] to and fro."²⁸ When confronted with the hag, however, Florent is "stille as any stone."²⁹ He is as obedient as he has been throughout the rest of the story.

Given this dialogic development in Chaucer's Tale, we can understand Chaucer's and Gower's conclusions differently. Florent has the privilege of the Wife's knight must make his decision while at the mercy of the hag who better understands the situation. It is a mirror of the scene in which he makes the rash promise. As such, his submission to her sovereignty, and his way of responding to the choice of ugly or beautiful wife is an authentic recognition that his masculine sensibility is inadequate to the task of proper decision making. In actuality, by letting her choose, he is learning from past mistakes and acknowledging not only that she has the right to decide, but that she can do so better than he. In contrast, Florent's response dilemma, "Where he woll have her such [beauty] on night/Or ellés upon daiés light," is not due to an understanding of obedience that he has learned but one which he has demonstrated throughout the tale.³⁰

Thus whether or not the Tale's conclusion is actually feminist, it is unarguably progressive. Though some feminist critics argue that by having the hag choose to fulfill the stereotypical male fantasy the Wife is "undervaluing the 'self-justifying' potential of her own [story],"³¹ I contend that even if the Tale's conclusion represents a moment of masculine discourse, it only serves to remind the reader that the Tale needs a masculine voice in its conclusion to be truly dialogic. The hag choosing to be beautiful and faithful is the first point where the masculine and feminine discourses harmonize. Even though Gower's knight declares, "Thus graunt you I mine holé vois," the story ends with the father-son patrimonial discourse that frames the *Confessio Amantis*.³² The reader is inevitably reminded that *Tale of Florent* is an *exemplum* written by a man for men and the sexual power dynamic is absent from the question Florent faces and the answer he gives.

Regardless of how its conclusion is interpreted, Chaucer's Tale is still making a movement toward a feminist conception of matrimonial harmony. The step toward gender parity that the Tale takes was largely unprecedented given Chaucer's source material in the anti-feminist loathly lady tales. By making use of both masculine and feminine discourse, Chaucer informs both the knight's as well as the reader's understanding of medieval gender dynamics as the story progresses. Gower's tale is not concerned with these questions of gender parity. The greater theme of the *Tale of Florent*, and the section of the *Confessio Amantis* to which it belongs, is obedience. His story is a moral *exemplum* which focuses as much on Florent's obedience to the quest as to his submission to female sovereignty. Gower edifies us while Chaucer playfully challenges our expectations. If Chaucer called the *Confessio Amantis* the "moral" Gower, then perhaps we can in turn call *The Wife of Bath's Tale* the "cheeky" Chaucer.³³

Notes

¹ Henry Morley. *John Gower's Confessio Amantis*. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1889), xxi.

² Peter Beidler and Elizabeth Biebel. *Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale: an Annotated Bibliography*. (Toronto: U of Toronto P), 1995, 29-47.

³ John Gower. *Confessio Amantis*. Ed. Henry Morley (London: George Routledge and Sons), 1889, 74.

⁴ Hope Phyllis Weissman. "Antifeminism and Chaucer's characterization of women." *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Malcolm Andrew. (Toronto: U of Toronto P), 1991, 111.

⁵ Gower, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. Eds. Rober Boenig and Andrew Taylor. (Peterborough: Broadview Press), 2008, III, 887-8.

⁸ Gower, 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹ Chaucer, III.897.

¹² *Ibid.*, III.1047.

¹³ Gower, 68.

¹⁴ Chaucer, III.909.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III.912

¹⁶ Gower, 69.

¹⁷ Chaucer, LLL. 925-38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 992.

¹⁹ Gower, 72.

²⁰ Chaucer, III.883.

²¹ Gower, 68.

²² *Ibid.*, 70.

²³ Gower, 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁵ Gower, 70.

²⁶ Chaucer, III.1042.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, III.1061.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, III. 1085.

²⁹ Gower, 73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ Weissman, 123.

³² Gower, 74.

³³ Morley, xiv.