

A Short Adaptation:

Absence and Erasure in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*

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Whenever I teach Chaucer, for the final assignment I give the students the option of doing something creative – a script for a play, a painting, a song. The danger of these kinds of ‘adaptation’ assignments is that the student will merely re-tell the story, and not really offer any interpretation. But the upside of them is that some students really *get* the assignment, understanding how adaptation be, in itself, a powerful reading of a text. Drue, in her adaptation of the Wife of Bath's Tale for a movie, gives one such reading. She *does* retell the tale, but does so thoughtfully and critically, giving the smallest details interpretative significance. As her accompanying essay shows, her interpretation is also well-grounded in research, and supported by scholarly articles on the tale. Moreover, she dared to disagree with the reading of the tale I taught in class – a brave stance that itself is an implicit rejection of the kind of monologic discourse that the Wife of Bath fights against.

– Dr. Kathy Cawsey

FADE IN:

EXT. UNPAVED, DIRT PATH- DAY

WIDE SHOT.

On a rocky, dirt path with several potholes, just beyond a large forest (backdrop), there is a horseback knight. The weather is dreary and overcast. He, the horse, and the surrounding environment are soaked from a previous rain shower.

MEDIUM CLOSE UP.

The knight, as he looks defeated and without pride, slowly trots his horse along the path, it's hooves stomping into puddles. He

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begins to hear the voices of women he had encountered across the land.

VOICEOVER

(The voices speak in a round, on top of one another)
...best richesse...

VOICEOVER 2

(Matter-of-factly)
...honour...

VOICEOVER 3

(Slightly deeper, lighthearted voice)
...jolynesse...

VOICEOVER 4

(Excited voice)
...riche array...

VOICEOVER 5

(Straight to the point)
...lust. In. Bed...

VOICEOVER 6

(Normal vocal pace)
...wydwe and wedde...

VOICEOVER 7

(With a poetic rhythm)
...our hearts are most eased when we are flattered and pleased...

CLOSE UP.

The knight looks up at the long road ahead, his brow furrowed, before shaking his head in frustration, shutting his eyes and looking down.

VOICEOVER 8

(This one is isolated with no vocal interruption)

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...we loven best, for to be free and do right as us lest.

VERY WIDE SHOT

The Knight continues down the path. The sky grows darker.

NON-DIEGETIC WHITE NOISE BECOMES AUDIBLE

CLOSE-UP BIRD'S EYE SHOT.

The horse's right hoof steps in a murky puddle.

TRACKING SHOT of the hoof, where the faint image of the maiden he raped earlier appears in the next puddle. Her face is drawn and forlorn. The hoof stomps in the puddle, dissolving the image.

LONG SHOT.

The knight continues down the muddy, dirt path in the direction back home. His horse trots, as no clear end or destination is in view.

FADE OUT

In Chaucer's story, a knight in King Arthur's court is sent on a year-long journey to discover what women yearn for, serving as an opportunity for redemption propositioned by the Queen after raping a maiden (under the presumption that she desired him, as this is the understanding he is accustomed to) and affronting the court. If he does not find a suitable answer to the court's question, the knight will be decapitated for his misconduct.

I selected this portion of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* because I felt it was a significant moment of reflection in the text. The Knight in question is on a mission to find out "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (Chaucer Line 905) and, at this point in the tale, has fallen short of an

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exact answer. No two women can provide him with the same response, causing the Knight to feel defeated, accepting his fallen fate as he journeys homeward. This is why his face appears with such anguish as he hears in his mind the unhelpful answers he had received from the myriad of women he had questioned. However, in my cinematic interpretation the Knight is frustrated because women appear as complex, intricate human beings. They want no single thing, and are not the objects he has understood them to be. They are layered, which is why the voices progress in a round.

This scene is an argument against ideas resembling restorative justice in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a specific justice is in fact not restored; the fate of the raped maiden, whose name Chaucer does not ever reveal as “no woman in her *Tale* has a name at all” (Lindley 6). There are so many female voices acknowledged, however limited, in the text (including the Wife of Bath herself) with the exception of the maiden. As a result, the opinions of the women he encounters are incorporated (Chaucer Line 925-936) as voiceovers to resemble thoughts in the Knight's mind. The reader follows the course the Knight takes to a ‘fulfilling’ experience that supposedly redirects his priorities and notions of women, with no consideration for the woman who brought this upon him. By the conventions of fourteenth century society, this woman is now tarnished and serves no purpose as a result of the rape while the knight finds new purpose. Even if this is not the case for the maiden, the reader has no notion of otherwise because she is never again referenced

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throughout the entirety of *The Canterbury Tales*. Despite the notion that “women want ‘maistrie’ and though he has saved his head, the knight’s passive position suggests the amount of maistrie he himself has already lost” (Holland 281) the position is not equated. She has absolutely no say during the trial, as Arthur’s Queen determines the sentence for the knight, and, as a result of the oppression of the time period, has no say in how the remainder of her life shall carry forth. This is why in my adaptation the maiden appears in the murky puddle, as her fate is destined to remain in perilous, ‘murky’ uncertainty, before her image dissolves, just as she fades into the background of the text for Chaucer. Chaucer effectively “dismisses the maiden” (Roppolo 266) when really to do all facets of the story justice “the uncertainties of the text need to be confronted, however, not eliminated” (Lindley 2). The catalyst of this plot point becomes the forgotten, as the “text is about who and what isn’t there as much as it is about what is” as the reader “would do well to inquire why disappearance” (Lindley 3). It draws on the fact that “The story is equally vague and inviting about why the queen and her ladies, who have every reason to sympathize with his victim, ask the rapist to be spared and placed at their disposal” (Van 185) presenting the paradox of a morally grey area.

This same reasoning is applied to the audio selection: white noise plays immediately after the female voiceovers come to a conclusion, as the thoughts and feelings of the maiden, what she “most desiren” (Chaucer Line 905), is no longer of concern. It is simply white noise in the audience’s mind at this point. Even in Joseph

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Roppolo's essay that details how the story allows "The Hag and the Wife of Bath to become the two characters of major importance, and the Knight is almost a mechanical instrument used for purposes of plot." (264) This paper at no point references how this same idea could easily be applied to the raped maiden. Furthermore, it can be argued that, for the audience, "the story builds on a fear of sexuality as phallic aggression leading to helplessness or loss, and the Tale deals with that fear by regression to oral passivity" (Holland 283). This loss is the maiden's loss of identity and sense of self or purpose in the story, and the oral passivity can be characterized by her lack of voice.

Water is a commonplace symbol of rebirth or renewal and in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* it is believed that the Knight undergoes such a transformation, as it is a "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" (Roppolo 263). However, it is also noteworthy that what is not discussed in depth is the "characterization and motivation of the knight" Roppolo 264). As the Knight's life "depends on the correct answer to a question" (Roppolo 265) I used this symbolism as a form of poetic justice that is not apparent in the text. The Knight, and the surrounding area, is soaking wet from a vicious rain shower that just occurred, as he continues on his seemingly defeated journey. However this rain simply washes over him, just like the true purpose of the mission, which is not to save his own life but rather to allow him to truly understand the opposite sex. The disappearance of the raped maiden is personified through a physical

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manifestation of her predicament: the rain will dry and the puddle her image appeared in, much like her presence, shall evaporate.

The use of the maiden's image in the puddle is also an attempt to draw on "the tradition of mirror literature and allusion" as the intent of this form of medieval literature was to "show things as they are and ought to be, in terms of exemplary ideas" (Bradley 624). The image reflecting back from the grit of the road at the Knight is meant to be a societal reflection, implying the lack of agency in this maiden in the story and victims in reality, as "Chaucer uses the mirror and its equivalents primarily for idealization of character" (Bradley 629). I agree with the notion that "Other people exist as mirrors or instruments for the entertainment of the self" (Lindley 7) and so this device is used in my adaptation to secure emphasis on the maiden in the puddle.

My intended audience for this piece is not only those who do not believe that "courtly love interpretations of this are scene are not necessarily destroyed if we accept it as rape" (Roppolo 266) in regards to the occurrence of rape in this tale. The audience should seek amalgamation in the 'quyting' of such tropes, viewing the rape plainly for what it is and not romanticizing the supposed evolution of the Knight while questioning the disappearance of the maiden. It is made clear that "the Knight is a favourite with the ladies, who know and condone his actions" (Roppolo 266) and the reason he is given this special treatment is a product of "pleas" that "continue for so long a period that King Arthur is finally overwhelmed"

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(Roppolo 266) not a uniform justice system. The audience should also be aware of tropes present in medieval literature in order to fully understand the subtle irony within the scene's structure.

Ultimately this scene emphasizes the erasure of the maiden in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the utter irony of this circumstance as she is the driving, yet unheard and unseen, force of the narrative. It provides an opportunity to acknowledge the plight of the most marginalized character in the text, and the only voice that the knight, and reader, should be focused on.

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