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The loathly lady in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale and Gower's Tale of Florent

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*To my family, my dearest friends, and all those people
who have shown me that love exists through big and small acts of care.
You have been my guiding light.*

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Foreword

The first time I read Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* I noticed that I was already familiar with some elements of the story. In fact, the loathly lady of the tale reminded me of several stories of my childhood that used the same pattern with some adjustments and changes. When I studied *The Canterbury Tales*, I found how Chaucer employs a motif from the folkloric tradition to tackle serious topics, such as women's role in marriage in the medieval society, very interesting. Compared to other tellers, I found the Wife of Bath an ambiguous and yet very intriguing character, not only because Chaucer describes her as an unconventional woman for her time, but also because she tells a story that traditionally presents a female model that is the opposite of the one the Wife wants to transmit. For this reason, I decided to focus my dissertation on the *Wife of Bath's Tale* to explore the meaning Chaucer gives to the pattern of the loathly lady. To do so, I carried out a comparative analysis between the Wife's Tale and the *Tale of Florent*, by John Gower. The aim of my dissertation is to consider two narratives that employ the pattern of the loathly lady for different purposes, changing its meaning but keeping several elements in common. The analysis between the two tales is meant to reach a conclusion regarding the meaning the two authors give to the loathly lady in their tales.

To do so, I first focus on some general aspects that enable to set the context of the motif of the loathly lady and give some background information on the general meaning of the pattern. Chapter One gives a general overview of the motif, presenting the loathly lady's main traits and dynamics in the narrative. The chapter also provides some information on the genre of the two tales under analysis, the romance, showing how the same core elements of the two tales can be employed to give the story completely different meanings. Moreover, to be more familiar with the core elements of the loathly lady narrative, I propose an analysis of the motif using Vladimir Propp's classifications of functions and characters. This analysis is followed by an overview of some antecedents of the motif coming from the Irish folkloric tradition, and I briefly compare them with the English versions. Finally, I

provide some considerations on the role of women in medieval England and on the historical, social, and cultural background of fourteenth-century medieval society.

After that, Chapter Two focuses on the literary context of the two works in which the two tales are found: *The Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis*. First, I provide a general overview of the *Canterbury Tales*, focusing on the Wife of Bath as narrator and analysing her Prologue. The analysis of the Wife's Prologue is essential to her tale, not only to understand its meaning, but also to find the relationship between the Wife and the loathly lady in her story. Then, I introduce Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, with an analysis of its Prologue, in order to highlight the poem's aim, and with some information regarding the *Tale of Florent* to connect the tale with its framework. In this chapter, I also highlight several differences concerning the narrators' style of narration and purpose, which help to introduce the loathly lady in the two tales.

Finally, with the third and last chapter, I provide an in-depth analysis of the two tales. Before the analysis, I make some considerations on the external appearance of the loathly lady and the audience's expectations on her behaviour. I further resume the topic of the romance to underline how changes to the genre of romance contribute to create different meanings and implications in the two tales. Then, the analysis is carried out considering the core elements of the loathly lady motif, found in both narratives: the crime at the beginning of the tale, the quest, the encounter with the loathly lady, the answer to the riddle 'what women most desire', the marriage dilemma and the final transformation of the loathly lady. The insight on each of these elements allows me to investigate the differences concerning the meaning of the loathly lady in the two tales.

All things considered, the comparison of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* with an analogue, the *Tale of Florent*, allows me not only to investigate the aims of the two tales, but also to examine the pattern of the loathly lady to have an overview of earlier narratives that contribute to the evolution of the motif across literatures and cultures.

1. The motif of the loathly lady

1.1. Definition and collocation of the motif

The loathly lady is one of the most ancient and popular motifs of medieval European literature and folklore, and its presence covers both oral and written tradition. To understand the meaning of this motif and its collocations, a premise on certain terms and their definitions is necessary. A motif is a unit of narrative, involving characters, places, situations, or dynamics that are easily remembered by the audience, out of the ordinary; it regularly occurs in stories and folktales.¹ Motifs are related to tradition and to popular culture, and for this reason they are essential parts of folktales. In fact, the very definition of ‘folktale’ suggests this relationship: “of, pertaining to, current or existing among, the people; traditional, of the common (local) people” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). A folktale is not merely a term that defines a specific kind of story, but it rather comprises an extensive meaning, including a wide range of narrative forms, coming from both spoken and written tradition, and several recurrent motifs.² Motifs and folktales are therefore part of the same field of investigation, as stories belonging to a specific literary tradition have influenced narratives coming from different cultures and traditions, sharing motifs, and shaping them in multiple forms and meanings. The peculiarity of this contamination between stories and folktales, is that one motif may have different aims and meanings according to the narrative or according to its authors. In particular, the motif of the loathly lady belongs to the folkloric tradition and can be found in a variety of medieval narratives, each of which gives the motif a different aim and meaning and shapes the pattern with its own peculiarities.

According to Thompson’s classification of motifs, the pattern of the loathly lady can be found under the section entitled ‘D: Magic’, and, more precisely, in the subsection entitled ‘Disenchantment’ (code of the motif: D732). Stories dealing with transformation and disenchantment comprise most motifs in folktales, as transformation is an action allowing changes, adjustments, and developments

¹ Garry, Jane and El-Shamy, Hasan, eds., *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature. A Handbook*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005, p. xv.

² Thompson, Stith, *The Folktale*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977 (1946), p. 4.

throughout the literary and folkloric tradition. Thompson defines the motif as follows: “she can be released from the spell that puts on her a disgusting face and figure when she is actually taken to wife and embraced by a handsome man”.³ This clear but concise presentation of the pattern helps to give a general description of who the loathly lady is, as well as the context of action and narrative where it is found. Generally speaking, the loathly lady presents herself in the guise of a repugnant and gruesome old lady and offers counsel to an errant knight. Each version has its peculiarities, but the shared concept of the motif is the fact that the knight chooses voluntarily to follow the advice of the old lady and, in exchange, he must marry her. The power of marriage and the disposition of the knight to embrace the old lady despite her ugliness are the elements that cause the transformation of the loathly lady into a young, lovely woman. This general description of the main trait of the motif points out how the loathly lady is an imaginary character, but behind her unusual identity, the pattern of the old lady transforming into a young maiden reveals several ambiguities, creating an entanglement of interpretations that continuously shapes new ideas.⁴ Indeed, the intrinsic ambiguity of the character is noticeable in some of her defining features, such as the counsel to the knight, the final transformation, or the genre of the story. The meaning of these elements varies from story to story, as each author employs and shapes these features in different ways according to the aim they give to the loathly lady figure. The analysis of two versions of the loathly lady story (Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and John Gower’s *Tale of Florent*), as well as the considerations of earliest versions of the pattern and analogues of the two stories mentioned before, will provide a deeper insight on these differences.

³ Thompson, p. 259.

⁴ Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Carter, Susan, “Introduction”, in Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Carter, Susan, eds., *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales. Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, p. xiii.

1.2. The loathly lady and the genre of romance

The motif of the loathly lady is commonly found within Arthurian romance, “a medieval narrative (originally in verse, later also in prose) relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero of chivalry” (*OED*). The idea of romance that is generally accepted by the audience focuses on a worthy knight living under the reign of King Arthur who embarks on adventurous quests, travelling across lands to win or to protect a lady, and he is frequently engaged in fights and combats.⁵ In several versions of the story of the loathly lady, the audience immediately recognises the genre where the story takes place, because of several elements people associate with the medieval romance: “the perilous question, the marriage price, the wedding night dilemma, and the lifting of enchantment”.⁶ These features are present in Chaucer’s version of the story as well as Gower’s, with different traits. From a genre universally recognized like the romance, several interpretations and meanings can be drawn from the same Arthurian motifs, producing changes in the meaning of the genre itself and on the dynamics of each motif. Therefore, the pattern of the loathly lady creates the space to speculate on several aspects of the Middle Ages as a historical period, as well as on its literary tradition.

First, romance was, and still is, a very well-known genre and, consequently, the audience was familiar with codes and patterns typically found in romance,⁷ creating expectations about the development of the narrative. Moreover, it gives the audience an insight on the dynamics within the court of King Arthur and it helps to understand more about courtly life. Given these premises, the loathly lady allows discussing the meaning of the genre itself, subverting gender roles, manipulating the narrative and overturning and mocking the conventional practices and conventions. As far as gender roles are concerned, the comparison between Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and Gower’s *Tale*

⁵ Burrow, J.A., “The Canterbury Tales I: Romance”, in Boitani, Piero and Mann, Jill, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 143.

⁶ Wurtele, Douglas J., “Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and Her Distorted Arthurian Motifs”, *Arthurian Interpretations*, 2 (1987), p. 48.

⁷ Quinn, Esther C., “Chaucer’s Arthurian Romance”, *The Chaucer Review*, 18 (1984), p. 218.

of *Florent* gives the chance to discuss if gender roles are universally accepted standards to which literary works are to be compared,⁸ considering both the social and historical context, as well as the aims of the authors.

Secondly, romance was generally acknowledged as a genre whose main purpose was to amuse readers. However, not only was romance a source of entertainment, but also was characterized by some degree of didactic aspects.⁹ This last statement is crucial for the understanding of the correlation between the motif of the loathly lady and romance, as it highlights how the motif helps the audience to have an insight in the role of women in the medieval society, transmitting moral and didactic teachings. This element becomes relevant when considering the relationship between the loathly lady and the knight. Moral teaching follows two different directions, connected to the aim of the author. On the one hand, the knight in the *Tale of Florent* undergoes a process of awareness of “the importance of keeping his vows”,¹⁰ and the romance consequently highlights the importance for a knight to preserve values and virtues according to the chivalric code. On the other hand, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* gives emphasis to the role of the woman, who is in control of the self-awareness and moral change of the knight.¹¹

Indeed, the combination between a fantastic world and realistic elements, points out how, “far from being illusions powerless to affect reality, fantasies affect the way people and societies feel and act”.¹² The choice of using a motif from the folkloric tradition and a story where magic and adventure are intertwined, is related to the intention of transmitting moral teachings, an insight, and a social critique on medieval life. For this reason, romance is an appropriate tool to pursue this aim because

⁸ Blamires, Alcuin, “Questions of Gender in Chaucer, from *Anelida* to *Troilus*”, *Leeds Studies in English*, 25 (1994), p. 84.

⁹ Burlin, Robert B., “Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre”, *The Chaucer Review*, 30 (1995), p. 2.

¹⁰ Passmore, S. Elizabeth, “Through the Counsel of a Lady. The Irish and English Loathly Lady Tales and the ‘Mirrors for Princes’ Genre”, in Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Carter, Susan, eds., *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales. Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, p. 18.

¹¹ Meyer, Robert J., “Chaucer’s Tandem Romances: A Generic Approach to the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” as Palinode”, *The Chaucer Review*, 18 (1984), p. 228.

¹² Fradenburg, Louise O. [Aranye], “‘Fulfuld of Fairye’: The Social Meaning of Fantasy in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”, in Beidler, Peter G., ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*, Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996. Reprinted in Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales. Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 2018, p. 594.

it enabled the audience to understand their reality (and consequently, contemporary readers to understand fourteenth-century reality) through the metaphor of a fable.

Lastly, the motif allows to investigate the role of medieval women and, in particular, the opposition youth-age and consequent stereotypes around the various stage of the life of a woman. Female youth was associated with chastity and innocence, whereas the concept of old age in women was related to figures such as the wife, the mother, or the widow. However, this dual relationship did not clearly define youth and age as periods in the life of a woman, and what determined the youth or the age of a woman was her social status: whether they were married, with children or widows, their social condition defined their age.¹³ There was no consideration for an in-between phase, such as the middle-aged woman.¹⁴ It has been difficult to define at what age a woman could be considered old, and it is even more complicated to identify the middle-age as a stage of life. Therefore, “the Arthurian loathly lady offers insight into varying effects of female longevity, including marriage between old women and young men”,¹⁵ as well as into their potential and abilities within medieval society and into the concepts of sovereignty and authority within the marriage. My analysis further promotes the investigation on who was the middle-aged woman, her role, purpose, and potential in medieval society, as well as commonplaces constructed around the old woman and, in general, around aging and old age.

In conclusion, the motif of the loathly lady, not only gives the audience an “insight into the power of old women and the pressures they could bring to bear over the young”,¹⁶ but also explores how middle-age was a period of life where women could expand their opportunities, their knowledge and their role in society, drawing on “the potential in older women’s lives”.¹⁷ However, one thing to bear in mind when considering the motif and its relevance for fourteenth-century society, is that each

¹³ Niebrzydowski, Sue, “‘Becoming Bene-Straw’: The Middle-Aged Woman in the Middle Ages”, in Niebrzydowski, Sue, ed., *Middle-aged Women in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 2011, p. 2.

¹⁴ Niebrzydowski, p. 1.

¹⁵ Feinstein, Sandy, “Longevity and the Loathly Ladies in Three Medieval Romances”, *Arthuriana*, 21 (2011), p. 23.

¹⁶ Feinstein, p. 24.

¹⁷ Niebrzydowski, p. 11.

of the narratives I examine is a male narrative, which means that each story was constructed by a male author. This aspect becomes relevant when considering the aims and purposes of the loathly lady in several stories. The comparative analysis between the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Tale of Florent* allows to discuss whether the motif really allows women a different a more autonomous position in society or it is simply a means through which the author reaches his aims.

1.3. The loathly lady tale according to Vladimir Propp's classification

The loathly lady is a motif generally accepted as part of the folktale tradition and one assumption that can be drawn is that, even when employed in different stories with different aims, it presents recurrent and common elements. The motif of the loathly lady creates the pattern for a fairy tale, as it shares with the general conception of the fairy tale "its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition".¹⁸

In this section this thesis suggests an analysis of the motif and its recurrent elements according to Vladimir Propp's classification of functions and characters. One element to consider when employing this classification is that functions are actions performed by the characters of the tale and constitute the essential element of its structure. Propp described thirty-one functions, but in each tale we can find only a limited number of these functions.¹⁹ Throughout his studies, Propp has identified recurrent functions and characters in a large amount of fairy tales. Characters and functions will repeat, creating different stories and patterns, but giving the tale itself uniformity and regularity.

The first function is: "the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go, or he is dispatched (definition: mediation)".²⁰ This action is found at the beginning of the narrative, when the knight, after being almost sentenced to death for his crimes, is spared by a female figure belonging to the nobility, who gives him the chance to redeem himself by going on a quest to find the

¹⁸ Propp, Vladimir Ja., *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed, rev. and ed. by Louis A. Wagner, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968, p. 21.

¹⁹ Propp, p. 21.

²⁰ Propp, p. 36.

answer to the riddle: ‘what women most desire’. The difference between the two versions under analysis is the reason for the death sentence that eventually brings the authority to spare his life: in Chaucer, the rape of a young maiden; in Gower, the murder of another man. The two following functions, always involving the knight, are “the seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction (definition: beginning counteraction)”²¹ and “the hero leaves home (definition: departure)”²². In contrast with what Propp states about these two functions, in the loathly lady narrative the consent and the departure are not actions spontaneously taken by the knight: he is induced to do so in order to have a chance of survival. Between Chaucer’s and Gower’s versions, the difference lies in the attitude of the knight in front of this imposed quest and whether he is passively accepting his fate or showing a degree of resistance. This function opens the discussion on resolution of conflict between male and female characters, as well as on gender roles, and how the two versions of the tale portray conflict between the various characters, analysing whether “a balance of powers, of advantages and disadvantages”²³ is reached.

After the departure, the beginning of his journey follows the encounter and the first action of the loathly lady. Propp defines this function as “the hero is tested, interrogated (...), which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper (definition: the first function of the donor)”²⁴. The loathly lady asks him what he is seeking. In response, the knight, after telling the woman about his quest, receives the help of the loathly lady, who grants him survival provided he keeps his promise of fulfilling her request. One thing to consider is that there are versions where the request is already made explicit to the knight (such as the *Tale of Florent*) and others where the request is known only after the fulfilment of the quest (as the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*). This difference highlights

²¹ Propp, p. 38.

²² Propp, p. 39.

²³ Mandel, Jerome, “Conflict Resolution in the Wife of Bath’s Tale and in Gower’s Tale of Florent”, in Laura Filardo-Llamas, Brian Gastle and Marta Gutiérrez Rodríguez, eds., *Gower in Context(s). Scribal, Linguistic, Literary and Socio-historical Readings (Special issue of ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa 33.1)*, Valladolid: Publicaciones Universidad de Valladolid (2012), p. 70.

²⁴ Propp, p. 39.

once more how functions are indeed creating uniformity and regularity among the various versions of the story, but at the same time, shaping differences according to the aim of the author.

When the knight is able to answer to the initial riddle correctly, thanks to the help of the loathly lady, two more combined functions can be noticed: “the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated”²⁵ and “the hero returns (definition: return)”.²⁶ By giving the correct answer to the question ‘what women most desire’, which was the aim and object of his search, he is avoiding death and fulfilling his initial quest, after being for a year in search of the right answer. The following function can be noticed after the marriage between the knight and the loathly lady. It is defined as: “a difficult task is proposed to the hero (definition: difficult task)”.²⁷ The task under question is the choice of the knight in front of the dilemma proposed by the loathly lady during their first night of marriage. This recurrent element can be considered a task per se since Propp highlights how tasks are of various nature. In this case the task is not a physical test, or another journey to take, but is a more introspective task requiring the knight to make a choice about the appearance of the loathly lady and, consequently, about his destiny.

The last function is “transfiguration: the hero is given a new appearance”.²⁸ In the loathly lady narrative, two transformations take place. The first is more explicit, as it is the transformation of the old hag into a beautiful, young woman, after the knight decides to give the woman the authority to choose about her appearance. The second involves the knight and his sense of morality and duty, since the previous task and the consequent transformation of the lady have had strong repercussions on his attitude, contributing to his moral change. The presence of this double motif is strongly connected to the idea of the resolution of a conflict which, at the end of the narrative, involves the loathly lady and the knight. In Chaucer’s and Gower’s versions, differences can be noticed on whether the transformation of the loathly lady develops from a mutual agreement between the knight and the woman, or it only involves the knight and his need to resolve his internal conflict and, consequently,

²⁵ Propp, p. 53.

²⁶ Propp, p. 55.

²⁷ Propp, p. 60.

²⁸ Propp, p. 62.

transform his moral status.²⁹ It could also be argued that it is something completely dependent on the loathly lady and, more specifically, on women.

Propp also states how each function, in its recurrence, is likely to be performed by the same character. In other words, many functions can be grouped in specific spheres of actions and each sphere is related to a particular performer.³⁰ Propp identified the following characters: the hero, the villain, the helper, the donor, the dispatcher, the princess (a sought-for character) and the false hero. Within the loathly lady narrative, some of these characters can be identified, even though in some cases the correspondence between characters and functions is not as straightforward as Propp presents it. Indeed, Propp himself believes that there may be cases where one character performs more than one sphere, or that one sphere including several actions may be accomplished through different characters.³¹

The knight of the story corresponds to the hero. He performs first the agreement to take on the quest and the following departure, after being asked to go on a journey. Then, thanks to the help of the loathly lady, he is able to return home and provide the answer, which was the object of his search. Moreover, he is involved in an action of transformation that finds different reasons in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and in the *Tale of Florent*. On the one hand, the speech of the loathly lady about 'gentillesse' is the source of the process of the moral transformation that the knight is subjected to.³² On the other hand, the knight himself must come to terms with his own moral judgment, "realize the principle that guides that decision"³³ and eventually being rewarded with a beautiful young woman only after undergoing this moral process. The dispatcher is identified with the woman sending the knight on a quest to find the answer to the question 'what women most desire'. In both stories, the figure is a woman of nobility, the Queen or the grandmother of the dead knight, and they are both

²⁹ Mandel, p. 76.

³⁰ Propp, p. 79.

³¹ Propp, pp. 80-81.

³² Meyer, p. 232.

³³ Mandel, p. 77.

allowed to make decisions upon the life of the knight. The power granted to these two female figures is connected the relationship between male and female characters, female authority and sovereignty.

As far as the loathly lady is concerned, a degree of ambiguity surrounds this character. Therefore, to assign the loathly lady to a character and functions from the ones proposed by Propp is more complicated. To a certain extent, the loathly lady could be considered the donor, because she promises the knight the answer he is seeking, provided that she is granted something in return. The answer, in this case, can be considered the element given by the donor to help the knight fulfil his quest. However, the loathly lady could also be identified as the helper, in relation to the final transformation of the knight. Two elements contribute to identify the loathly lady with the character of the helper. The first is related to the function of transfiguration. According to Propp, the transfiguration of the hero is one of the actions belonging to the sphere of the helper, and therefore, the correlation with the loathly lady appears logical. The second element is connected to the ability of the loathly lady, whether she uses real magic or women's abilities, to cause the transformation of the knight. However, because of the intrinsic ambiguity of her character, as well as the different aims of the two narratives, it could be argued that the real protagonist of the narrative is the loathly lady herself. This affirmation has little connection with the classification proposed by Propp, and it is deeply connected to the reasons and meanings Chaucer and Gower give to the motif.

1.4. Antecedents of the motif: Irish tales

This thesis focuses on two English tales containing the motif of the loathly lady, but when considering the loathly lady as a pattern, earlier versions employing the motif are undoubtedly worth mentioning. In particular, an insight on three earlier narratives coming from the Irish tradition and folklore will further expand the motif of the loathly lady and explore how the pattern was employed in previous narratives. Indeed, whether it is expressed explicitly or not, the fundamental premise is that there must be some formal and apparently discernible relationship between narratives that feature

similar occurrences.³⁴ For this reason, the consideration of earlier Irish tales employing the motif of the loathly lady enables to explore the relationship between the various narratives, to highlight the differences and similarities and to question and reflect upon the actual influence coming from previous narratives. The investigation using Propp's framework that has been previously carried out gives a clearer idea of the elements belonging to the English versions and, consequently, of the changes occurring from the Irish tales.

The Irish tales, generally known as kingship tales, were intentionally written to have a strong political relevance, telling stories about the capacity of the knight to follow advice as well as to possess particular qualifications and attributes of kingship.³⁵ In all the narratives considered in this section, the protagonist, a knight named Níall, is tested to prove his worth as future king of Ireland by the old hag. Consequently, the possessions of qualities like humility and kindness make the candidate fit for kingship.³⁶ The old woman is a metaphor representing the concept of sovereignty and she “offers formative instruction to the exemplary Irish protagonist”³⁷ by testing him to find the essential qualities required for the kingship.

The first Irish tale is called *Echtra Mac Echdach Mugmedóin*, (“The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón”), and it is a poem of seventy-three stanzas composed by Cúán Ua Lothcháin, a Gaelic poet at the court of Máel-Sechnaill, king of Tara until his death in 1022.³⁸ Níall is the son of king Eochaid Mugmedón but after his death in 365, he does not inherit the throne of Ireland because his stepmother, Mongfind, first wife of his father, had other four sons from king Eochaid and she wants one of them to inherit the throne of Ireland. In the meantime, she claims the throne for her brother. For this reason, not only does the stepmother enslave Níall's mother, but also she abandons Níall when he is born. He is raised by Torna, who is defined as a “mighty bard” [stanza 10]. After

³⁴ Bollard, J.K., “Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady in English, Welsh and Irish”, *Leeds Studies in English*, 17 (1986), p. 41.

³⁵ Passmore, p. 8.

³⁶ Bollard, p. 48.

³⁷ Passmore, p. 3.

³⁸ Biography retrieved from <https://www.dib.ie/biography/ua-lothchain-cuan-a8748> (accessed 14 March 2023).

several years, Níall returns home and claims freedom for his mother, willing to pursue any quest or tribute to free his mother, even taking her place: “Mad calmu intí dobera, mad amru imres slega, meisse bias co dobruig de fo drolmaig is fo choire” [stanza 26].³⁹ Soon after, Níall is sent hunting with his four stepbrothers. They take turns in search for water in the forest and it is during this search that they encounter a loathsome lady: “Écess óenmná ar a brú bél aicce i tallfad cú, a curach fiacal ’moa cenn, éitchi indát fúatha Hérenn” [stanza 35].⁴⁰ To each of them, the old hag asks for a kiss in exchange for the water. However, all Níall’s stepbrothers refuse to satisfy the request of the old lady and they come back without any water. Níall is the last one, and he confronts the ugly hag as well. Another, more detailed description of the woman precedes the interaction between hero and lady, and this second presentation gives the audience a clearer image of her aspect:

Immarránic in glaissi macc rí Banba barrchaisi,
 cofacca inní in deilb ndochruid coscháil cennléith clúm chochlaig.
 Trí nói sreth fiacal fata, bat crúaidi na garbslata,
 immar bít benna búabail, consnítis ’moa sengúalaind.⁴¹
 [stanzas 44 – 45]

Níall does not show any hesitation and he is willing to kiss her in exchange for the water. What follows is the transformation of the old lady into a beautiful woman. When Níall asks the reason for her transformation, she reveals to him that he was able to show his value and worth and therefore be the rightful heir of his father as king: “In gráin atchess duit arm’ gnúis ar báig niarni do drúis, at adbar flatha Temra” [stanza 55].⁴² This interaction between the knight and the lady constitutes the formative instruction. After her transformation, the lady offers counsel to Níall, instructing him on the steps he must take to gain the throne: to return to his stepbrothers and ask them for their blessing to be entitled to kingship. This interaction is significant as it shows the role of the loathly lady in this narrative. On

³⁹ This is the version I use for the first Irish tale: Joynt, Maud, trans. and ed., “Echtra Mac Echdach Mugmedóin”, *Ériu*, 4 (1910), pp. 91-111. “if braver he be who (such tribute) lays, if with greater skill he plies his spears, then ’tis I will bear defeat’s disgrace beneath the vat and the cauldron’s load”.

⁴⁰ “A sibyl (there stood) on its brink: a mouth she had, into which a hound would fit; her spiked tooth-fence about her jaws was more hideous than all the goblins of Erin”.

⁴¹ “As soon as he reached the stream, the son of the king of Banba of leafy locks, he beheld her there, that hideous shape, thin-shanked, gray-headed, bushy-browed. Thrice nine rows of long teeth had she – hard were the bristling tusks, as a buffalo’s horns are wont to be – twisted round to her aged shoulders”.

⁴² The fearsomeness in my face thou sawest, since it repelled not thy desire (?), thou art the princely heir of Tara”.

the one hand, she claims Níall's right to be king because he shows his worth, anticipating the prosperous length of his reign: "Is amlaid sain bis ríge, garb a thús, tosach ndíne, bláith a mmedón, mét nemed, ocus sáim a sírdeired" [stanza 56].⁴³ On the other hand, it is Níall's duty to follow the advice of the old lady to be recognized as the legitimate king. Despite overcoming the test and being valued from her as worthy of the throne, "he must also carefully follow the steps delineated by the goddess in order to grasp the kingship to which he has a right through the prophecy and his abilities".⁴⁴

The second Irish tale is also entitled *Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedóin* ("The Adventures of The Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón") and is written in prose. It is found in a manuscript entitled *Yellow Book of Lecan*.⁴⁵ The story follows the same line as the previous version but expands certain elements and characters. The first difference is the role and importance given to Torna, the poet who took care of Níall after he was abandoned. Torna foreshadows his destiny through a prophecy: "Mochean aigidan, bid he Niall Noegiallach, rusfith ria re tuir. Morfaiter maigi, srainfiter geill, firfiter catha. [...] Secht mbliadna fichet fallamnaigis Herenn, bid uad Heriu co brath" [para 3].⁴⁶ Thus, the author anticipates Níall's suitability for kingship and his worth and good values, which will be confirmed once Níall encounters the loathly lady. Moreover, this first foretelling of Níall's destiny implicitly allows a reflection upon the role of counsel and advice in this story. The prophecy is given to Níall when he is a child, and even when he becomes an adult he is not considered the legitimate heir to the throne, even if the prophecy says the opposite. The prophecy will be explained by the loathly lady when Níall encounters her, as she clarifies how becoming king is not only a matter of recognizing one's value: to pursue kingship one must show a disposition to accept every aspect of being a ruler,

⁴³ "Even so shall be thy rule; rough its beginning, rise of generations; smooth its mid-course, store of honour: peaceful shall be its final close".

⁴⁴ Passmore, p. 9.

⁴⁵ This is the version I use for the second Irish tale: Stokes, Whitley, trans. and ed., "Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedóin", *RC* 24 (1903), pp. 172-173, 190-203.

⁴⁶ "Welcome, the little guest; he will be Niall of the Nine Hostages: in his time he will redden a multitude. Plains will be greatedened: hostages will be overthrown: battles will be fought. [...] Seven-and-twenty years he rules Erin, and Erin will be (inherited) from him for ever".

including the negative ones.⁴⁷ For this reason, only acting according to the counsel of the loathly lady will give Níall the right to claim the kingship for himself.

The second difference lies in the figure of the loathly lady. In contrast with the previous version, the description of the old hag is expanded and includes more details:

Is amlaid bui in chaillech, co mba duibithir gual cech n-alt each n-aigi di o muliach co talmáin. Ba samalta fri herboll fiadeich in mong glas gaisidech bai tria cleithi a cheandmullaich. Consealgad glasgeg darach fo brith dia corran glaisfiacra bai 'na cind co roichead a hou. Suli duba dethaighe le, sron cham chuasach. Medon feteach breabaindeach ingalair le, luirgni fiara fochama siad, adbronnach leathansluaistech si, glunmar glaisingnech. Ba grain tra a tuarascbail na cailligi [para 11].⁴⁸

When it is Níall's turn to search for the water and he encounters the old hag, he responds affirmatively and genuinely to her request of kissing her. In fact, he claims: "laigfead lat la taeb poici do thabairt fri taeb" [para 14].⁴⁹ She then transforms into a beautiful lady, "ni raibi forsin domun ingen bid chaime tachim nó tuarascbail inda si" [para 14].⁵⁰ Níall's generosity and humility, the qualities that make him worth of becoming king, anticipate his will to follow the counsel coming from the loathly lady. Becoming king will eventually imply taking decisions and making choices that may be difficult or hard to follow, but the true worth of a king is recognizing the difficulties within the responsibility of a monarch. Instead of ignoring or avoiding them, one must learn to live with these hardships and grow through them.

The loathly lady, after her transformation into a beautiful maiden, reveals herself as the sovereignty, the same sovereignty Níall is entitled to exercise: "Misi in Flaithius, or si" [para 15].⁵¹ In this narrative, she is identified as a metaphor of sovereignty, embodying the meaning of the concept in her resemblance of a young, beautiful lady. The lady then confirms the truth of the prophecy announced by Torna, proclaiming Níall the rightful heir to the throne. As happens in the previous

⁴⁷ Passmore, p. 10.

⁴⁸ "Thus was the hag: every joint and limb of her, from the top of her head to the earth, was as black as coal. Like the tail of a wild horse was the gray bristly mane that came through the upper part of her head-crown. The green branch of an oak in bearing would be severed by the sickle of green teeth that lay in her head and reached to her ears. Dark smoky eyes she had: a nose crooked and hollow. She had a middle fibrous, spotted with pustules, diseased, and shins distorted and awry. Her ankles were thick, her shoulderblades were broad, her knees were big, and her nails were green. Loathsome in sooth was the hag's appearance".

⁴⁹ "Besides giving thee a kiss, I will lie with thee!".

⁵⁰ "There was not in the world a damsel whose gait or appearance was more loveable than hers!".

⁵¹ "I am the Sovranty".

version, the loathly lady advises Níall not only on the reasons behind the worth of being king and his suitable qualifications, but also on the necessity to follow her advice. To follow the loathly lady's counsel means "to submit to the will of *in Flaithius*",⁵² and therefore to accept the hardship and difficulties coming from the responsibility and power of kingship:

Acus amail adcondarcas misi co granna connda aduathmar artús alaind fadeoid, is amlaid sin in flaithius, uair is annam fogabar he cen chatha cen chongala, alaind maisech immorro ria nech e fodeoid. Acht chena na tabair-seo in t-usce dod braithrib co tucad aisceda dait .i. co tucad a sinsirrdacht duid, co ro thocba th'arm ed lama uas a n-armaib seom [para 16].⁵³

Once more, the narrative points out the power of counsel coming from the loathly lady, who is a metaphor for sovereignty. The narrative still remains hero-oriented, as the main point of these tales is to instruct on the qualities that make a good and worthy king. However, the advisory role of the loathly lady is significant in orienting the knight to understand his worth and act according to the good values that make a humble and noble king.

The third and last Irish tale is entitled *Tarrnig in sealsa ag Síle Néill* and was written during the reign of Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchubhair, who reigned from 1189 to 1224 and to whom the poem is addressed.⁵⁴ The narrative follows the main elements of the previous versions but gives particular importance to the prophecy. Níall goes in search for water after his stepbrothers and in the middle of the forest he encounters the old hag. The description of the loathly lady, despite being less detailed, is in line with the representation in the two previous versions:

Éirgis cuice suas ón tsruth
fiadchaillech roba garb guth;
sínis uaithi i coinne in chuaig
láim féithig fata fortruaig.⁵⁵
[stanza 22]

Súile linnacha liatha
mailge garba greinnliatha

⁵² Bollard, p. 48.

⁵³ "And as thou hast seen me loathsome, bestial, horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the sovranity; for seldom it is gained without battles and conflicts; but at last to anyone it is beautiful and goodly. Howbeit, give not the water to thy brothers until they make gifts to thee, to wit, seniority over them, and that thou mayst raise thy weapon a hand's breadth over their weapons".

⁵⁴ This is the version I use for the third Irish tale: Ó Cuív, Brian, trans. and ed., "A Poem Composed for Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchubhair", *Ériu*, 34 (1983), pp. 157-174.

⁵⁵ "There rose up towards him from the stream a wild hag whose voice was rough; she stretched out towards the cup a long sinewy and very emaciated hand".

fiadmael deimside ar na dód
tréna cenn cnámach cluasmór.⁵⁶
[stanza 24]

The old hag, after being kissed by Níall, transforms into a beautiful lady and, as in the previous versions, claims to be the sovereignty (“Ó ro scaras rit fó scéim, ó ro chlaeclóis do deilb féin, innis, a shaerchlann shercach t’ainm, a ingen ilrechtach” “In flaithes meise” [stanzas 31-32]).⁵⁷ Then, she reveals that Níall is destined to gain the throne of Ireland and explains that the setting is an allegory of how Níall’s kingship will be. Indeed, through the allegorical explanation, the woman is giving an overview of the political situation in twelfth-century Ireland and of the difficulties the monarch has to face. One main difference from the two previous versions regards the role of the loathly lady as a counsellor. In fact, “the goddess’s counsel moves outside of the text to address the king-candidate for whom the poem was actually composed, departing from her earlier role as instructor of the legendary Níall”.⁵⁸ The loathly lady gains political relevance in addressing an existing situation, inviting a real king to be consciously aware of his role as a monarch and to use wisely the power coming from his sovereignty.

In each story, the old hag and her transformation into a beautiful woman are related to her advisory role. She is not educating him on the qualities and values that a king supposedly has, as the knight proves to be already gifted with humility, generosity, and cleverness. What the loathly lady does is to help the knight use these qualities, guiding him to own the kingship through certain actions that prove his worth and qualifications. In the first two tales, the narrative presents an exemplary account of the attitude that kings and monarchs generally have to aspire to, which is Níall’s disposition at following constructive advice to rightfully and properly exercise sovereignty. The last tale, through the figure of Níall, is charged with a political meaning because the counsel of the loathly lady is

⁵⁶ “Watery grey eyes, coarse grey shaggy eye-brows, a wild cropped scorched bald pate forming part of her bony big-eared head”.

⁵⁷ “Since I have separated from you in beauty, since you have altered your own form, tell what is your name, o noble loving offspring, o many-formed maiden”. “I am the sovereignty”.

⁵⁸ Passmore, p. 13.

directly given to the current ruling king of the time. Sovereignty is directly related to power and kingship, therefore the ability of the knight to follow the old lady's advice to gain the throne. However, the identification of the loathly lady with sovereignty has also to do with the symbolic relationship between women and land. Women have always been associated with land and prosperity, and this association is present in these tales, even though the lady gains a political significance. As a territory is directly dependent on its owner, who is able to make that land prosper, so the loathly lady's transformation is related to the right choice of a good and worthy knight. Her suitors must be put to test and the ideal monarch carefully selected because to win her hand is to control and gain power over the territory.⁵⁹

In conclusion, the motif is a means through which the knight recognises the importance of advice and counsel. He is able to act according to the qualities he already possesses and, consequently, gains lawful kingship.

1.4.1. Irish tales and English tales: a comparison

As previously stated, it is highly probable that these Irish tales influenced the English versions written in the fourteenth century. There are several elements that, from a formal point of view, appear both in the Irish and in the English tales. In each tradition, a knight is asked to go on a quest, whose nature and meaning varies according to the versions. He then meets the old lady, who demands the knight to satisfy her sexual desire in exchange for what he is looking for. Another similarity concerns the final transformation of the hag into a fair lady and the relationship between the woman and the concept of sovereignty.⁶⁰ The recurrence of these elements in all versions, may hint at the influence coming from the antecedents that shaped the form and narrative of later versions such as Chaucer's and Gower's tales. The pattern of the loathly lady was built to reach a rather fixed configuration and the earlier versions, therefore, may have been influential in starting the process of creation of the

⁵⁹ Aguirre, Manuel, "The Riddle of Sovereignty", *The Modern Language Review*, 88 (1993), p. 278.

⁶⁰ Aguirre, p. 274 – 275.

motif. Each narrative gives a peculiar meaning to these elements, but the recurrence may hint at this influence.

On the other hand, one can notice contrasts in presenting and using these same features across the various narratives. Firstly, the relationship between the old lady and the knight is based on the concept of counsel but follows two distinct directions. In the Irish versions the advice of the loathly lady is the means through which Níall can prove his qualification and worth to become the future king of Ireland. Moreover, the counsel is considered more a prophecy than actual advice,⁶¹ which gives more emphasis on the necessity of behaving suitably to be worth of kingship. On the other hand, the counsel of the loathly lady in the English tales has been defined “transformative advice to the imperfect English protagonist”.⁶² This expression highlights how the loathly lady is also responsible for educating the knight on several qualities that he lacks. In both *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Tale of Florent* the advice given to the knight after he agrees to marry the old hag is intended as transformative advice because it changes the disposition of the knight, who becomes aware of the qualities he needs to earn. Consequently, differences are noticed in the process of transformation of the loathly lady into a beautiful maiden. If in the Irish tales the transformation is caused by Níall’s disposition to act according to his worth and value, which brings him to kiss the loathly lady, in the English versions the transformation of the old hag depends on the change of the moral attitude of the knight. Therefore, the loathly lady plays an important part in establishing “whether he possesses the necessary qualities for a good ruler and, if not, she shows him how to behave more properly in order to gain those qualities he requires”.⁶³

One last element that is shaped differently between Irish and English tales is the concept of sovereignty and the relationship with the figure of the loathly lady. As previously stated, in the Irish tales the loathly lady becomes a metaphor for the concept of sovereignty, which she chooses to give

⁶¹ Passmore, p. 29.

⁶² Passmore, p. 3.

⁶³ Passmore, p. 29.

to the hero because it is a quality that he does not possess. In the English tales, sovereignty distances from the conception of ruling over lands and kingdoms, and it involves the woman's authority in marriage. In both *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Tale of Florent*, the woman is granted sovereignty after the knight recognises the need to change his moral disposition and, in doing so, she claims authority over the knight, who enable her to transform into a beautiful lady. Each of the English tales shapes and develops the element of sovereignty in different ways and follows different aims.

1.5. The loathly lady and the 'old wyf'. Historical, cultural, and social background

Both the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Tale of Florent* develop the motif of the loathly lady by considering several aspects of the historical and social background of the Middle Ages intrinsically related to the life of women and to the role of the 'old wyf'. The first aspect to be taken in consideration is old age:

'Old age' may be defined chronologically, by birth-date; functionally, in terms of fitness to perform certain tasks; biologically, in terms of physical fitness and other physical characteristics; or culturally, in terms of everyday perceptions and definitions of old age.⁶⁴

To give an idea of the different perspectives, 'old age' will be explored following two different viewpoints. On the one hand, from a chronological point of view as an attempt to answer the question 'at what age were women considered old?'. On the other hand, from a cultural angle, considering the opposition youth-old in relation to social roles such as the virgin, the mother, the wife and the widow. This latter investigation aims at highlighting how women's maturity was also strongly influenced by the social status of women and intertwined with several images and expectations on women's behaviour and attitudes.

When referring to old age in women, it is difficult to say at what stage of life were women considered old, since the meaning of old age was not directly dependent on the chronological age of women. Indeed, what once was considered old age, was also connected to that stage of life commonly

⁶⁴ Thane, Pat, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 24.

known as middle-age, which is an in-between period that, to a certain extent, is intertwined with the definition of old age. The starting point to understand the ambivalent nature of old age are various classifications that the Middle Ages used as a framework of the various stages of life. Aristotle's classification was largely employed by medieval scholars: he divided life in three main moments, placing the middle-age as the moment of life where one was at the peak of his potentials, powers, and possibilities.⁶⁵ Another noteworthy system that was familiar in the medieval mentality derived from Ptolemy's theories. Medieval thought stepped aside from Ptolemy's assumption that each stage of life was subjected to the influence of planets, but it preserved the septenary division of the ages of man that Ptolemy theorized, placing 'middle age' under the denomination *robor*, which means strength.⁶⁶ The most widely acknowledged classification was proposed by Bede and it associated "the process of age with the four humours".⁶⁷ As well as for the other classifications, middle age as a stage of life was depicted as a prosperous period in a man's life.

These classifications are interesting in showing us medieval conceptions of the stages of life. However, they are mainly man-centred and descriptions of middle age as a period of strength and power are not entirely applicable to women. That is because these beliefs were theorized thinking about men, and when women's middle-age was questioned, "it was understood to be marked by the loss of beauty and fertility, and the onset of sterility and the menopause".⁶⁸ Rather than being considered in the prime of their lives, women were depicted as already old, deprived of their potentialities. However, even though these classifications were not meant to describe the stages of a woman's life, they can be used to consider women's maturity and old age as an ambiguous phase of life. In particular, it is useful to deal with these aspects to highlight how women could profit from the opening of possibilities and potentialities during their middle-age.

⁶⁵ Niebrzydowski, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Niebrzydowski, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Saunders, Corinne, "Middle Age in Romance? Magic, Enchantment and Female Power", in Niebrzydowski, Sue, ed., *Middle-aged Women in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011, p. 38.

⁶⁸ Niebrzydowski, p. 7.

From the classifications mentioned before, we can deduce that middle age is comprised between the thirties and the fifties, and women of this age were labelled old because of their physical appearance. However, “appearance and actual physical and mental conditions do not (...) necessarily coincide”⁶⁹ and the loathly lady is the proof of this last statement. Appearance is not the element that defines the lady, but it is rather what creates expectations about her behaviour and potential. Therefore, the concept of old age was also influenced by social and cultural elements that reinforced the representation of middle-aged women as old, distancing it from the chronological age. Stereotypes on old age contributed to the spread of distorted images of old women, frequently portrayed as malevolent, yearning for wealth and lacking in morals⁷⁰. These stereotypes are strongly connected to the opposition between youth and old age, which created the basis upon which conventions were created. This youth-age opposition is embedded within several social roles women were identified with during the Middle Ages, and each social role was intertwined with several preconceptions and stereotypes about women. We can identify four social roles that are representative of the youth-age opposition: virgin, wife, mother and widow.

Youth is strongly connected with the image of the virgin, portrayed as a model to aspire to for women during medieval times. Indeed, virginity is considered a more valuable life condition than marriage or widowhood because this condition had the power to fight both nature and earthly desires.⁷¹ Regardless of their social standing or marital status, chastity was the most significant quality a woman could possess and didactic literature addressing women stressed the importance of preserving this trait for as long as possible.⁷² Consequently, precepts about virginity shaped how a young woman should speak, think and act. The ideal model of a young woman “was one of few

⁶⁹ Classen, Albrecht, “Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Also an Introduction”, in Classen, Albrecht, ed., *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Classen, p. 25 (Classen is paraphrasing Parkin, Tim G., *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁷¹ Evans, Ruth, “Virginites”, in Dinshaw, Carolyn and Wallace, David, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 25.

⁷² Shahar, Shulamith, *The Fourth Estate. A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, London and New York: Methuen, 1983, p. 109.

words, who, when she did speak, did so pleasantly with a mild demeanour, and used only pure language”.⁷³ She should behave and act properly in order not to be “held responsible for arousing the male gazer”,⁷⁴ either with her actions or with her external appearance. When considering the socially recognized image of the virgin, we cannot ignore the power the Christian religion exercised in spreading certain ideas or models to imitate. Indeed, in the New Testament, we find some passages that stress the meek behaviour young women were expected to have:

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence (I Timothy, 2: 9-12 AKJV).

Social roles such as wife, mother and widow are all connected with women’s maturity. Even if women married at a young age, to be a wife, a mother or a widow implied certain written and non-written expectations on the roles, which influenced not only the socially accepted image of these social positions, but also the concept of middle-age and women’s adulthood. Wife and mother were two roles intertwined through marriage, and they shared common characteristics and features, as well as some stereotyped visions. Women’s life in marriage was strongly dependent on their marital status, and to be married or not determined the image society attributed to women.⁷⁵ Wives were referred to with the expression *femme covert*, which meant “under the cover of her husband”⁷⁶ and their life, rights and duties were dependent on the husband’s will and power. Marriage is considered a sacrament in Christian culture, therefore the relationship between wife and husband was regulated both by civil and canon law. As an institution, the Church had a considerable influence in legitimising the inequality of the sexes, establishing man’s predominance in marriage and condemning the wife to a subordinate role.⁷⁷ As for the general attitude of women, the Scriptures dictated how wives should

⁷³ Niebrzydowski, Sue, “Late Hir Seye What Sche Wyl: Older Women’s Speech and the *Book of Margery Kempe*” in Niebrzydowski, Sue, ed., *Middle-aged Women in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011, p. 107.

⁷⁴ Evans, p. 33.

⁷⁵ Shahar, p. 5 (Shahar is paraphrasing Lakoff, Robin, *Language and Woman’s Place*, New York, 1975, pp. 40-41).

⁷⁶ Elliott, Dyan, “Marriage”, in Dinshaw, Carolyn and Wallace, David, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 44.

⁷⁷ Shahar, pp. 88-89.

behave in marriage: “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing” (Ephesians, 5: 24).

The attitude towards the woman as a mother was not very different from how she was considered as wife. Motherhood was the natural development of being a wife and was seen as her natural assigned role in marriage. Not only were married women expected to become mothers because of social expectations, but also the Church and Christianity played an important role in emphasizing this idea. Indeed, there are several passages in the Scriptures that praise the importance of motherhood and “declared that to be a barren wife was one of the greatest misfortunes which could befall a woman”.⁷⁸ The Holy Mother becomes the model for motherhood’s traditional attributes of tenderness, delicacy and selflessness.⁷⁹

The widow is the most problematic role to examine, as it presents an ambiguous nature and a dual perspective. In contrast with married women, widows benefitted of some degree of independence and freedom from men’s authority. Indeed, a widow enjoyed the same legal rights as men, including the ability to make contracts, bring legal action, own property and speak for herself in court.⁸⁰ The Church encouraged the remarriage of widows, seen as a “natural phenomenon”,⁸¹ because it meant that women were once again under the control of the new husband. The choice of remarriage was affected by some elements: widows would remarry because they longed for affection, or their anxiety over economic vulnerability may have outweighed a desire for independence and autonomy.⁸² However, widows were generally much more eager to enjoy their freedom rather than remarry. In both cases, a good and honourable reputation among society was presumably the aim of widows.⁸³ Widows were characterised by contrasting elements that create two different perceptions. On one

⁷⁸ Mendelson, Sara and Crawford, Patricia, *Women in Early Modern England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 67.

⁷⁹ Shahar, p. 99.

⁸⁰ Hanawalt, Barbara A., “Widows”, in Dinshaw, Carolyn and Wallace, David, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 59.

⁸¹ Shahar, p. 94.

⁸² Mendelson and Crawford, p. 183.

⁸³ Hanawalt, p. 60.

hand, they were included among the disadvantaged people to whom the Church offered protection.⁸⁴ The New Testament stresses this aspect: “Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day” (I Timothy, 5: 5). On the other hand, they were generally portrayed as being rampantly sexual, cunning, insubordinate and experienced.⁸⁵ Indeed, the Church reinforced this idea focusing especially on their sexual desires, which “were voracious and, once unleashed, difficult to manage”.⁸⁶ To understand this general belief, I briefly quote some passages regarding the Wife of Bath. The first is found in the presentation of the Wife in the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*: “and on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe [...] Of remedyes of love she knew per chaunce, for she coude of that art the olde daunce” (473, 475-476).⁸⁷ The term ‘spores’ indicate the spurs on her shoes that represent her disposition for power and control. The second statement can be found at the beginning of the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, when the Wife announces her intention to talk about her marriages: “experience, though noon auctoritee, were in this world, is right ynough for me to speke of wo that is in mariage” (1-3). Even if these two extracts can open up the discussion on women’s authority and potential during their middle age, the Wife of Bath as a character contributes to emphasise the image of the widow as an experienced but undisciplined woman. To have experience in marriage highlights not only the potential for widows to remarry, but also the influence and power they can exercise over the husbands, disrupting the canon of the obedient and meek wife. However, medieval society did not accept lightly the subversion of conventions, and the image of the woman living her role in society “through innocence and submission, not through experience and dominance”⁸⁸ was favoured.

The virgin, the mother, the wife and the widow show how the imposition of certain assumptions upon women, driven by the society and the Christian Church, may lead women to go

⁸⁴ Shahar, p. 95.

⁸⁵ Mendelson and Crawford, p. 68.

⁸⁶ Hanawalt, p. 60.

⁸⁷ This is the version I use for *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*: Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales. Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 2018.

⁸⁸ Wood, Chauncey, “Three Chaucerian Widows: Tales of Innocence and Experience”, in Dor, Juliette, ed., *A Wyf Ther Was. Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, Liege: L³ - Liege Languages and Literature, 1992, p. 290.

against these predetermined images. If marriage in medieval society condemns women to economic and sexual exploitation by the masculine world, then a woman who wishes to speak and act for herself can use the resources she has at her disposal to play the game herself,⁸⁹ speaking and acting against male influence. Widowhood will be taken in consideration in the next chapter in relation to the Wife of Bath as a teller and how her Prologue represents her as a woman who is living her maturity and widowhood and not submissively acting according to the canon. However, we must remember that she is a female character giving a female perspective on the role of women and widows in society, but she is given voice through a male author. Chaucer is neither offering any explicit criticism against women like the Wife of Bath nor is he praising women who can speak for themselves and subvert social roles. He could be doing both in order to maintain the ambiguity surrounding the character, but also employing irony in presenting both the character of the Wife of Bath and her story.

This overview on the role of widows opens another question, which is women's authority; in particular, what authority meant for a middle-aged woman living in the Middle Ages. Nowadays, to have authority means to have "power or right to give orders, make decisions and enforce obedience; moral, legal or political supremacy" (*OED*). In medieval society, authority was intended as the power given to men and given to authoritative writings, generally accepted as true and undeniable. Men were given power and authority in society and in marriage, and women were constrained in a passive and submissive role with limited possibilities of action. Women had a certain degree of power within the household, considered their natural space of influence. Once again, the Scriptures were the main source of moral behaviour and also influenced the meaning of authority in women. In the Book of Proverbs (31: 10-31) we read that "the good woman is placed in the household and valued for her work there".⁹⁰ Consequently, those women not conforming to this image were considered bad women, rebellious and dangerous. Expectations on women's authority were also present in the woman's role

⁸⁹ Leicester, H. Marshall, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self. Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 75.

⁹⁰ Salih, Sarah, "At Home; Out of the House" in Dinshaw, Carolyn and Wallace, David, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 125.

outside the household. They could only go to specific places without endangering their reputation and they should always adopt an exemplary behaviour, managing their speech and sexuality.⁹¹ However, as previously stated, if women were widows, they could benefit from some independence from the male authority and the Wife of Bath, being a middle-aged widow, represents a new model for women to claim authority in marriage. Her role in relation to authority will be further explored when dealing with her Prologue, always considering that the Wife is voiced by a male author, who may be mocking the model of the Wife or praising her as a new model for women of his time.

When in the Prologue the Wife says: “My dame taughte me that soutiltee” (576), she opens the discussion on one last element to explore, which revolves around the belief that old women, or women not conforming to the standards of society, were like that because of certain powers they shared. People believed that this power was related to non-written knowledge existing among women, and only women were able to access it. Medieval society attributed a stereotyped meaning to female knowledge, which was not considered as serious or authoritative as male knowledge. When women gathered, they created a widespread sense of anxiety and fear in medieval society, which led to the stigmatizing of “all speech among women as gossip”.⁹² In particular, the male perspective considered women’s gossip as fraudulent information and it was thought to revolve around the same topic, which was women’s relationship to sexuality, both in relation to marriage and to their personal beliefs on the matter. Indeed, female gossip led women far from the required spiritual and ideal purity and condemned them to degradation, in spiritual and sexual terms.⁹³ However, the perspective changes drastically if we look at gossip from the female perspective: gossip becomes a space where women could exchange knowledge with one another, without the fear of being heard or understood by a male presence. A poem that helps contextualise the power of women’s knowledge in medieval society, both seen through the male and female gaze, is *The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, by

⁹¹ Salih, p. 134.

⁹² Lochrie, Karma, “Between Women”, in Dinshaw, Carolyn and Wallace, David, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 71.

⁹³ Lochrie, p. 72.

William Dunbar. It was written when Dunbar was a poet at the court of king James IV, writing and participating to most events promoted by the king to make his court the heart of culture.⁹⁴ The poem revolves around three women, two wives and a widow, sharing their marital experience and advice. The conversation describes women mocking their husbands, sharing advice and strategies on how to hold power in marriage. The widow, because of her experience in marriage, proclaims herself a teacher, claiming to give good advice on how to behave in marriage. The conversation takes place in the form of confession between the three women, “agreeing to full disclosure on the condition that their auditors are obliged to keep their confessions secret”.⁹⁵ However, the frame of this exchange is a man eavesdropping upon the whole conversation and reporting what he heard to a male community. Knowledge, in this sense, does not stay among women, but it is exported outside the female dynamic, changing its meaning and purpose, and labelled as gossip.

From the female perspective, the conversation can be read as threatening discourse that focuses on women’s pleasures and dissatisfactions about marriage, which leads to subverting male and patriarchal authority in marriage.⁹⁶ Indeed, each of the women confesses several aspects about their marriage life that expose their husbands’ unsuitability. For example, the first wife confesses that if it was not for the wealth of her husband and for her material possessions, she would not be with him, as he cannot satisfy her sexual pleasure:

Yit leit I never that larbar my leggis ga betueene,
To fyle my flesche, na fumyll me, without a fee gret;
And thocht his pené purly me payis in bed,
His purse pays richely in recompense efter:
For, or he clym on my corse, that carybald forlane,
I have conditioun of a curche of kersp allther fynest,
A gown of engranyt claith, right gaily furrin,
A ring with a ryall stane, or other riche jowell.⁹⁷
(133-140)

⁹⁴ Biography retrieved from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8208?rskey=DpNXHY&result=1> (last accessed: 27th April 2023).

⁹⁵ Matlock, Wendy A., “Secrets, Gossip and Gender in William Dunbar’s *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*”, *Philological Quarterly*, 83 (2004), p. 215.

⁹⁶ Matlock, p. 212.

⁹⁷ This is the version I use for *The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-trials-and-joys-dunbar-tretis-of-the-twa-mariit-wemen-and-the-wedo>

The second wife undermines and humiliates her husband, sharing how he is not living up to the expectations of a good, virile and potent man: “He has a luke without lust and lif without curage; he has a borme without force and fessous but vertu, and fair wordis but effect, all fruster of dedis” (188-190). The widow shares her experience with her two husbands and the life in widowhood. The most interesting aspect is that she uses her experience in marriage to show evidence of her ability “to turn her husbands’ weaknesses thoroughly to her advantage”.⁹⁸ The recollection of her marital story functions as advice for the other women on how to have authority in marriage, using the stereotyped image of the meek, passive woman to deceive their husbands:

I schaw yow, sisteris in schrift, I wes a schrew evir,
Bot I wes schene in my schrowd, and schew me innocent;
And thought I dour wes and dane, dispitous, and bald,
I wes dissymblit suttelly in a sanctis liknes:
I semyt sober, and sueit, and sempill without fraud,
Bot I couth sixty dissaif that suttilar wer haldin.
Unto my lesson ye lyth, and leir at me wit.
(251-257)

The widow becomes an emblematic example of a middle-aged, insubordinate woman, clever enough to use her experience and freedom for her own advantage. These examples disclose male anxieties and fears on the possibility of female dominance. From the female perspective, knowledge becomes that peculiar power accessible only to women, who are able to maintain information among themselves and turn it into a powerful means through which they claim their experience as authoritative.

However, the presence of a man listening to and reporting the whole conversation among women allows a change of perspective on women’s knowledge to the male point of view. After hearing the exchange, Dunbar describes the man talking to the audience, to whom he reports the conversation:

⁹⁸ Matlock, p. 219.

And with my pen did report thair pastyme most mery.
Ye auditoris most honorable, that eris has gevin
Oneto this uncouth aventur, quhilk airly me happinitt;
Of thir thre wantoun wiffis, that I haif writtin heir,
Quhilk wald ye waill to your wif, gif ye suld wed one?
(527-531).

The exchange is described as a “pastyme” (527). These last lines change the meaning of the knowledge shared by women: rather than being a confession where women support one another in front of the difficulties in marriage, the conversation was created “as staging an entertainment”,⁹⁹ a means through which men can hold on to their dominant position in society by controlling women’s thoughts and knowledge. Indeed, since the exchange is transmitted outside the female circle, female knowledge is used by the male eavesdropper as a tool of domination, portraying women through misogynist language and placing them under patriarchal control.¹⁰⁰ The whole conversation becomes a parody of female gossip but also a warning to the male audience, highlighting how power over women is maintained only if they use gossip to their own advantage, converting “feminine secrets to masculine knowledge”.¹⁰¹ The male perspective on female knowledge is connected to the concept of the scold, which was a stereotyped term to refer to women. The scold referred to women “of ribald speech” (*OED*) that could not keep quiet, especially on sexual matters. Their inability to keep secrets reinforces the opportunity for men to use female gossip and knowledge to pursue their aims and to maintain a dominant position in marriage and in society.

The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo does not clearly define a dominant position, but it rather puts male and female knowledge in a contradictory relationship. From the female perspective, knowledge is considered authoritative because it is related to their experience in marriage; from the male perspective, the eavesdropping man turns the same knowledge into gossip, seen as unreliable information. Men considered female knowledge a threat that could overturn positions in the marital relationship, but it also shows how the same knowledge, if not kept among

⁹⁹ Percy, Roy J., “The Genre of William Dunbar’s *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*”, *Speculum*, 55 (1980), p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Matlock, p. 225.

¹⁰¹ Matlock, p. 225.

women, can be used to defend men's supremacy in marriage. Therefore, the *Tretis* works as a parody of the exchange of gossip between women, but through irony, it also exposes men's vulnerabilities and unsuitability in marriage.

In conclusion, all these examples contribute to create an intricate image of what was like to be a middle-aged woman during the Middle Ages. The complexity created by these elements is a reflection of the ambiguity surrounding the character of the loathly lady in the two tales under analysis.

2. The loathly lady in *The Canterbury Tales* and in *Confessio Amantis*

2.1. The Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

The Wife of Bath's Tale is found in Chaucer's most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*. It is essential to provide a general overview of the work to understand the context in which we find the tale, because it cannot be considered separately from the framework Chaucer inserts it in. Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in the form of a story collection, recalling a group of pilgrims headed to Canterbury that share the journey and, in the meantime, tell one another tales: each pilgrim must tell "tales of best sentence and most solas" (798). All pilgrims come from different social classes, and in the General Prologue Chaucer inserts vivid and detailed presentations of each. At a first reading, the descriptions of the pilgrims seem to follow the fixed social hierarchy that was known as the three-estate society. This scheme was made of three main groups upon which the organization of society was founded:

the clergy whose business was with prayer and spiritual well-being: the warriors who defended the land and people with their arms; and the labourers whose toil supported the other two 'orders'.¹

Each pilgrim belongs to one of these estates, but this model is questioned as soon as the game of the tales starts. What the reader initially perceives is the attempt to maintain the hierarchy within the tellers and preserving recognizable and fixed obligations.² In fact, in the General Prologue, the tellers are presented from the most to the least high in rank. However, Chaucer's choice to put together pilgrims from different social backgrounds goes beyond the attempt to offer a general overview of the configuration of the medieval society, but it rather moves towards its criticism. Chaucer does not take any explicit critical positions on major matters, such as politics or religion: he questions the current hierarchy as not functional nor relevant to describe medieval society. He presents other points

¹ Keen, Maurice, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348 – 1500*, London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1990. Selected pages (pp. 1-8, 23-24, 306) reprinted in Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales. Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 2018, p. 507.

² Wetherbee, Winthrop, *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Selected pages (pp. 1-16) reprinted in Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales. Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 2018, p. 516.

of view in contrast to the canon perceptions of social roles, but not less worthy of attention nor less truthful. Indeed, on the one hand we find “the inadequacy of traditional categories”³ presented through parody (as in *The Knight’s Tale*); on the other hand, tellers that distance from “the place where they ‘stand’ in traditional social terms”,⁴ presenting a new and valued perspective. The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is inserted in this last category because its teller, the Wife of Bath, does not want to be enclosed in a fixed role dictated by society. With her Prologue and Tale, she explicitly breaks the boundaries to solicit a critique on the role and power of women in marriage and to question several values coming from men’s role in romances. Moreover, the disruption of the social hierarchy is seen also in the different literary genres assigned to the tellers: the higher the social rank, the more prestigious the literary genre. In particular, romance is used, subverting its conventions, to contribute to the critique made by the Wife of Bath.

The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is inserted in a group of tales focusing Chaucer’s social critique on a specific topic, that is marriage. The group is known as The Marriage Group and each of the pilgrims involved in the discussion gives his personal point of view on the subject. These tales are the ones that share a strong and visible connection, because the tellers start and finish an intricate discussion on marriage.⁵ The Wife of Bath promotes the debate, generating an exchange of contrasting points of view. She is the first to speak about marriage because she inserts in her Prologue her experience as a married woman, relating the topic to her life. She is the only narrator for whom we have personal extended information that goes beyond the description provided in the General Prologue. This choice could be related to making the Wife a representation of an existing middle-aged woman dealing with widowhood and discovering openings of power to claim authority in marriage. On the one hand, this view reinforces the idea of the disruption of social hierarchy because she provides an alternative perspective through which consider and discuss marriage. On the other hand, since the Wife is the

³ Wetherbee, p. 516.

⁴ Wetherbee, p. 516.

⁵ Kittredge, George Lyman, “Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage”, *Modern Philology*, 9 (1912), p. 467.

representation of a realistic woman, her perspective is not taken for granted nor considered an absolute truth. In fact, in her Prologue and in the following tales, other tellers question her opinions and behaviour, highlighting not only the attempt to preserve the social hierarchy and rules, but also the existence of multiple truths. Moreover, the audience recognises in the Wife of Bath a human narrator, meaning that even readers can participate in the exchange of opinions, choosing which perspective is the most suitable to their own.

The Wife of Bath's position as woman and as narrator cannot disregard the presence of another narrator, Chaucer, who gives voice to all pilgrims and depicts them in detail according to their social class. Since Chaucer was in contact with various aspects of the life of medieval England, from law, to life at court, to trade,⁶ he purposely constructed a collection of stories where tellers give different perspectives on several topics, often in contrast with one another. This combination of voices gives Chaucer the opportunity to criticise several aspects of medieval society and to employ irony and parody, always trying not to be too explicit when addressing contemporary matters. There are some tales where Chaucer's criticism is more evident, such as the *Knight's Tale*, which "shows chivalry repeatedly unable to contain or subdue disorder",⁷ but the same cannot be said for the Wife of Bath's. She is the only teller of whom the reader has information about her life and because of this personal insight, Chaucer is inserted in an ambiguous position as narrator. He is giving voice to a woman but doing so from a male perspective.

I propose two interpretations of Chaucer's role as narrator in this tale. The first is related to Chaucer's use of irony and parody in portraying and voicing the Wife of Bath. Throughout the Prologue, the Wife is described as an insubordinate woman, and the various interruptions remind her of her position in society. Indeed, when the Pardoner says: "ye been a noble prechour in this cas!" (165), his words can be interpreted ironically to highlight something that the Wife is not and will never be able to do, which is giving sermons and good teachings. Moreover, "the Wife of Bath (...)

⁶ Wetherbee, p. 514.

⁷ Wetherbee, p. 516.

seems unauthorized to tell her tale”,⁸ meaning that romance as a genre usually focuses on the male protagonist and perspective. By giving a female point of view, Chaucer may be constructing a parody not only of the genre, but also a mockery of the concept of sovereignty claimed by the Wife of Bath in her Prologue and given to the loathly lady in her Tale. The second interpretation gives Chaucer a critical role as a narrator. The Wife of Bath is still a teller created and voiced by Chaucer but giving “a female and a bourgeois perspective on a genre traditionally male-oriented and aristocratic”,⁹ Chaucer uses the romance to highlight new opportunities for women in marriage. In this case, Chaucer as a narrator is doing something similar to what Dunbar does with his *Tretis*. He has access to female knowledge, related to women’s role in marriage, and through the Wife of Bath he proposes a new and unconventional perspective on the relationship between husband and wife. Therefore, his role as a narrator is in line with his attempt to break the social hierarchy because he offers the Wife’s perspective as an alternative form of authority, not denying the truthfulness of the other tellers, but offering other models equally worthy of consideration.

2.2. An analysis of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue contains the presentation of the Wife as a character and of her experience in marriage. The analysis I propose will further help the understanding of her Tale, as the loathly lady of her story is strictly dependent on the Wife’s character, dispositions, and inclinations.

The first description the reader has of the Wife is found in the General Prologue. These lines (445-476) already offer a contradictory portrait of the Wife. She is first described as a “good wyf” (445) and as a fine dressmaker, but in the following lines we find other elements that contradict her supposed goodness. First, what seem authentic acts of charity she does for her parish, become acts of exhibition of her possessions and wealth:

⁸ Crane, Susan, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 113.

⁹ Quinn, Esther C., “Chaucer’s Arthurian Romance”, *The Chaucer Review*, 18 (1984), p. 217.

In al the parisshe wyf ne was ther noon
That to the offringe bifore hir sholde goon;
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.
(449-452)

Then, her clothes and appearance are described: “hir coverchiefs ful fyne were of ground” (453), “hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed” (456), and “shoos ful moiste and newe” (457). She wears eye-catching garments that mark her wealth but highlight her lack of modesty. Next, she is depicted as a “worthy womman” (459), an expression that does not refer to the Wife as a good person, but to her possessions and wealth. She is worthy because she benefits from some advantages and possessions coming from her many marriages. In fact, in the following lines, we understand that “housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve, withouten other companye in youthe” (460-461). On the one hand, this affirmation aligns with the previous statement, confirming that she is worthy because she gained profit from her several marriages. On the other hand, the mention of her lovers confirms her insubordination and desire to fulfil her sexual lust. Lastly, there are other two elements that further highlight her indiscipline. The first, the Wife being called “wandringe” (467), goes beyond the literal meaning of travelling. Instead, ‘wandering’ could be interpreted as not having a right path to follow or having lost the direction of the journey. If this meaning is applied to the Wife, we can say that she is a woman who does not behave or think according to the right path, but she rather ‘gets lost’ and chooses other ways to speak her mind. The second, the Wife being “gat-tothed” (468), is an expression that refers to a symbol of sexual promiscuity in medieval society.

Her personal story is expanded with details in her Prologue, which differs from the other tellers’ prologues in its function. The first impression is its absolute irrelevance in the context of her tale, because from a first reading, we cannot find any connection between her intentions and the contents of the tale. However, from the beginning, we can notice how the Wife uses her Prologue to claim her position as authoritative, challenging the hierarchy and social rules and, at the same time, it becomes an introduction to what will be presented in her Tale, which is the question of sovereignty in marriage.

Indeed, the Wife:

recognises that strategically she must delay stating her radical thesis until the end of the Prologue, when she has prepared the audience for her solution. To argue without preamble that the wife should have sovereignty over the husband would seem wilfully wrongheaded.¹⁰

In the first chapter, I mentioned how with the first words of her Prologue (1-3), the Wife claims to be entitled to talk about marriage because she has enough experience to be considered an authoritative source. The first thing the Wife does to sustain her position is to question the highest authority of the time, the Bible, which was considered undeniable. What the Wife does is challenging the Bible and the Church, offering examples that do not deny the truth of the Scriptures, but rather change their interpretation, also on the male authority that the Bible proclaims. These examples are not taken from other sources but from the Bible itself and are employed by the Wife to highlight the ambiguity within the same authoritative source. She argues that the Bible does not mention how many times a widow can remarry (“But of no nombre mencioune made he, of bigamye or of octogamye”, lines 32-33) and supports her claim referencing biblical figures like the Samaritan (15-25), king Solomon (35-43), and Abraham and Jacob (55-58), each of whom was married more than once. She also discusses the concept of virginity, believed to be an essential precondition for women (“Th’Apostel, whan he speketh of maydenhede, he seyde that precept therof hadde he noon. Men may conseil a womman to been oon, but conseil is no comandement”, lines 64-67). The Wife does not consider virginity as something indispensable, and she uses an interesting metaphor to highlight her belief:

I graunte it wel, I have noon envye
Thogh maydenhede preferre bigamye.
Hem lyketh to be clene, body and goost.
Of myn estaat I nil nat make no boost:
For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,
He hath nat every vessel al of gold;
Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse.
(95-101)

She mentions how some utensils of the household may not all be made of gold, but those made of wood can be useful tools to carry out tasks equally as the others. By using this metaphor, the Wife

¹⁰ Wimsatt, James I., “The Wife of Bath, the Franklin, and the Rhetoric of St. Jerome”, in Dor, Juliette, ed., *A Wyf Ther Was. Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, Liege: L³ - Liege Languages and Literature, 1992, p. 278.

claims that a woman in her same state is no less valuable than women who preserve virginity. She recognises the worth of virginity for society but, as she did with the Scriptures, she offers another point of view from which to consider women's condition.

Before the Wife goes on to talk about her personal life, she is interrupted by the Pardoner. The Pardoner, as mentioned before, describes the Wife as a good preacher and then he adds: "telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man, and teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (186-187). His intervention is an emblematic example of Chaucer's attempt to offer the Wife's speech as a new perspective and to claim it as authoritative, but not making it the only position. On the one hand, the Pardoner may be mocking the Wife for her attempt to teach men something about marriage; on the other, he may be genuinely impressed by her speech and want to learn more about female thought. Later in her Prologue, we can find another interruption, in line with the Pardoner's. The Friar bursts out laughing and points out the length of the Wife's Prologue: "The Frere lough whan he hadde herd al this. 'Now dame', quod he, "so have I joye or blis, this is a long preamble of a tale!" (829-831). His words are as challenging as the Pardoner's, because the Friar asserts once more how she is not entitled to give sermons or preach like she does with her Prologue. The Friar further expresses his disappointment at the beginning of his Prologue:

But atte laste he seyde unto the Wyf,
"Dame", quod he, "God yeve yow right good lyf!
Ye han heer touched, also moot I thee,
In scole-matere greet difficultee.
Ye han seyde muchel thing right wel, I seye.
But dame, here as we ryden by the weye
Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,
And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,
To preching and to scoles of clergie."
(1269-1277)

His words reproach her for having dealt with an issue that belongs to academics, not to women, and states how ecclesiastics are best suited to handle such matters.¹¹ The Friar, being a member of the clergy, expresses his fear of losing his authoritative position in society, but at the same time, his words

¹¹ Kittredge, p. 444.

show once more how the Wife represents the possibility of overturning the established authority by presenting another perspective.

Their attempts to challenge the Wife of Bath are linked to other tellers that question or mention her position in their tales. Indeed, we cannot disregard the relationship between the Wife's Prologue and Tale with other tellers of the Marriage Group, as they all contribute to the discussion on marriage and authority, continuously mentioning and quoting one another. I will briefly mention the Clerk and the Franklin because their tales and positions on the matter are influenced by the Wife's assumptions on marriage. Firstly, with his story, the Clerk responds to the Wife of Bath by presenting a woman whose marriage values are the exact opposite of her own.¹² In particular, there is a passage of his tale, called the Envoy (1177-1212), which he uses as an "ironical tribute to the Wife of Bath and her dogmas",¹³ mocking the Wife's position on marriage. Secondly, the Franklin draws inspiration from the loathly lady's sermon on 'gentillesse' to offer another and more balanced relationship in marriage, but at the same time he refuses the Wife's position of female dominance over the husband, claiming that both the husband and the wife should benefit of the same degree of freedom.¹⁴ The Clerk and the Franklin, related to the Wife of Bath's position on marriage, are the representation of Chaucer's double attitude towards the Wife: the Clerk mocks this new perspective; the Franklin offers a critique of the accepted and patriarchal models of marriage.

The most interesting part of the Wife's Prologue is her experience in marriage. Being married and widowed several times, she has experienced first-hand what it means to benefit from independence from the male authority, and throughout her Prologue she challenges "the proper relations between husband and wife: the husband was to rule the wife, just as reason ought to rule the appetites".¹⁵ She remembers her five husbands and for each of them she provides vivid descriptions

¹² Kittredge, p. 446.

¹³ Kittredge, p. 450.

¹⁴ Kittredge, p. 466.

¹⁵ Fradenburg, Louise O. [Aranye], "'Fulfilde of Fairye': The Social Meaning of Fantasy in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale", in Beidler, Peter G., ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*, Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996. Reprinted in Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales. Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 2018, p. 594.

of their relationships. What emerges are two different approaches to marriage and, consequently, the question of power and authority in marriage changes its meaning according to the husband. One element that contributes to create two distinct attitudes towards marriage is the age of her husbands. I will focus on her first three husbands and her fifth marriage because they clearly show the difference of attitudes. The first three husbands are good, rich and old, and the Wife has always received due reverence from them. She takes advantage of their loyalty to hold on to her dominant position in the relationship and to become wealthy. Indeed, she says:

But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
And sith they hadde me yeven all hir lond,
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
But it were for my profit and myn ese?
(211-214)

What she learns from her first three marriages is the power deception can have on men. In fact, the following passage introduces a long section where the Wife explains women's potential for deception, and how they can use it against their husbands:

Ye wyse wyves, that can understonde,
Thus shul ye speke and bere hem wrong on honde,
For half so boldely can ther no man
Swere and lyen as a womman can.
I sey nat this by wyves that ben wyse,
But if it be whan they hem misavyse.
A wys wyf, it that she can hir good,
Shal beren him on hond the cow is wood.
(225-232)

After these lines, the Wife highlights all the complaints husbands have for their wives by reporting words from Theophrastus' book about marriage. However, these words were written by a male author to explain how a woman could behave in marriage and what one could do to prevent these attitudes. The Wife overturns the meaning of these words and presents an ironic passage where she uses these complaints about women to demean her husbands. To reinforce her authority, she quotes a saying from Ptolemy's *Almageste*: "of alle men his wisdom is the hyste, that rekketh nevere who hath the world in honde" (326-327). In reality, this treatise does not deal with marriage, but with astronomy. Once more, the Wife deceives her husbands not only taking advantage of their lack of knowledge and old age, but also making her argument reliable by quoting an authoritative source. With her three old

husbands, the Wife shows that clever wives know that accusing their husbands of the lack of some qualities, can provide them with enough authority to act according to their own aims.

Deception also works in a more subtle way and her fifth marriage shows a different approach to marriage and authority. Her fifth husband, Jankin, is younger than her and their marital relationship is more challenging than the others. She claims she married him “for love and no riches” (526): having already inherited properties from her previous husbands, her fifth marriage seems to be a marriage for love. However, her attitude towards Jankin is described from the beginning as contradictory. She states he is the husband she loved most, regardless of his lack of reverence:

That thogh he hadde me bet on every boon,
He coude winne agayn my love anoon.
I trowe I loved him beste for that he
Was of his love daungerous to me.
We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,
In this matere a queynte fantasye:
Wayte what thing we may nat lightly have,
Thereafter wol we crye al day and crave.
(511-518)

Even though the Wife’s desires and pleasures are satisfied, Jankin is not the best of husbands, but the Wife sees his lack of loyalty and gentillesse as an opportunity to tame him by using the power of her sexual desire. Her intentions are not easily fulfilled as Jankin claims from the beginning a stronger authoritative position in the relationship. He is a well-instructed scholar from Oxford, and his education is the element he uses to hold his authority in marriage. In fact, the Wife describes how he would always tell her how to behave (“he nolde suffre nothing of my list”, line 633) and he would read to her stories about women who acted improperly towards their husbands:

And every night and day was his custome,
Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun,
From other wordly occupacioun,
To reden on this book of wikked wyves.
He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves
Than been of gode wyves in the Bible.
(682-687)

The book of ‘the wicked wives’ represents the male authority that in the previous chapter has been claimed as superior and the only truth to rely on. The Wife, aware of the importance authoritative sources of knowledge have in society, employs her experience as woman and as wife to try and tame

her husband and she does that by using deception. There are two passages that highlight her attempt.

The first, when the Wife recalls a dream she had when she first met Jankin:

I bar him on honde he hadde enchanted me –
My dame taughte me that soutiltee –
And eek I seyde I mette of him al night:
He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,
And al my bed was ful of verray blood;
But yet I hope that he shal do me good,
For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught.
An al was fals – I dremed of it right naught,
But as I fowled ay my dames lore
As wel of this as of othere thinges more.
(575-584)

At a first glance, this disturbing dream could represent the predominance and power held by the man, who can treat his wife as he wants. However, the Wife states that she has never had such a dream, and that was only a means through which deceive her future husband, by making him believe he has power over her. There is no certainty whether she really had this dream, or she is just lying to deceive him. Either way, manipulation by deception works on her husband because on the surface, she aligns with the conventional wife-husband relationship and affirms her husband's authority in their future marriage by recalling a dream where he has the power even to kill her if he wants. In reality, what she does is holding the authority to make him believe anything she wants. The second passage is found almost at the end of the Wife's Prologue, and she recalls an episode occurred when Jankin was reading some stories from his book of 'wicked wives':

And whan I saugh he wolde never fyne
To reden on this cursed book al night,
Al sodeynly three leves have I plight
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheke
That in our fyr he fil bakward adoun.
(788-793)

Her husband's reaction follows: "and with his fist he smoot me on the heed that in the floor I lay as I were deed" (795-796). Their confrontation can be read as a metaphor for the opposition between male authority and female experience. On the one hand, Jankin's authority relies on well-established sources. However, they do not reflect his position because he employs *exempla* of insubordinate women without any personal insight on these attitudes. Indeed, his reaction when his authority is

challenged by the Wife is turning to physical violence. On the other hand, the Wife's experience overturns the roles in marriage because she deceives him as she did with the dream. When she says: "O! hastow slayn me, false thee? (...) And for my land thus hastow mordred me? Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee" (800-802), she apparently tells him her love for him is stronger than anything he might do and, in doing so, she recognises his dominant position. In this case, the Wife is clever enough to make her husband feel compassion and pity for her, because she shows him reverence even after being beaten. I believe she deceives her fifth husband for two reasons. The first, her desire for authority in marriage; the second, her need to receive reverence and affection. These two elements were present in her previous marriages and the Wife wants to restore them even in a complicated relationship like the one with Jankin. What follows is Jankin's pitiful attempt to be forgiven ("as help me God, I shall thee nevere smyte; that I have doon, it is thyself to wyte. Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke", lines 805-807) and the rehabilitation of the Wife's sovereignty in marriage:

He yaf me al the brydel in myn hond,
 To han the governance of hous and lond,
 And of his tonge and of his hond also;
 And made him brenne his book anon right tho.
 And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
 By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,
 And that he seyde, 'My owene trewe wyf,
 Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf'.
 (813-820)

Therefore, the Wife becomes an example of a middle-aged woman who is able to challenge male authority by claiming her own experience as a form of authority. Indeed, "while men in power depended on legal instruments, the powers of coercion and forceful action, women (...) persuaded by argument and personal precedence. They had the 'power of persuasion'".¹⁶ The Wife's Prologue, where she recalls her life in tangible terms, functions as a background source that legitimises the reliability of her words.

¹⁶ Mulder-Bakker, Anneke B., "The Age of Discretion: Women at Forty and Beyond", in Niebrzydowski, Sue, ed., *Middle-aged Women in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011, p. 21.

The Wife's Prologue contributes to creating a strong and direct relationship between the Wife and the loathly lady in her tale, something that we cannot find in Gower's *Tale of Florent*. Apart from passages of the Prologue already mentioned, there is another that helps understand this connection:

For certes, I am al Venerien
In felinge, and myn herte is Marcien:
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse;
Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.
Allas! Allas! that evere love was sinne!
I folwed ay myn inclinacioun
By vertu of my constellacioun.
(609-616)

In this passage, the Wife associates her temperament and attitude with astrology, meaning that she is not entirely responsible for her behaviour, but it is rather influenced by the stars. The Wife has been previously described as a contradictory woman when analysing her behaviour in marriage, and her conflicting attitude can be also interpreted from an astrological perspective. In fact, "she is (...) the living embodiment, both in form and in character, of a conflict in astral influence".¹⁷ The conflict refers to the opposition between Venus and Mars in astronomy, occurring when the Wife was born, and the Wife uses both of them to refer to her inclinations and appearance. In astronomy, Venus is responsible for tender exterior features in women, providing them with naturally attractive and proportionate figures,¹⁸ as well as giving them a joyous and lovable character, which leads women to live love without any lecherous dispositions.¹⁹ The Wife of Bath could not be more distant from this description, because the astrological influence of Mars on Venus distorts all these good features. Indeed, in her Prologue, the Wife shows her disposition to domination in marriage and her scornful attitude when challenging the authority. Chaucer also puts the emphasis on some exterior features that underline her insubordinate temperament ("bold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe", General Prologue, 458; "gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel", The Wife's Prologue, 603).

¹⁷ Curry, Walter Clyde, "More about Chaucer's Wife of Bath", *PMLA*, 37 (1922), p. 43.

¹⁸ Curry, p. 44.

¹⁹ Curry, pp. 46-47.

This additional perspective enables us to have another interpretation of the Wife of Bath as a teller, but most importantly, it permits to relate the Wife with the motif of the loathly lady. From her Prologue, the Wife appears as a loathly lady herself because the old woman of her story can be easily related with her, in attitude and appearance. Indeed, the loathly lady seems the representation of the conflict between ‘Venus and Mars’, meaning that the same contradictory elements are typical of her character. The loathly lady represents the Wife’s inclination for affection and loyalty from her husbands when she gives the knight a long speech on ‘gentillesse’ and when she transforms into a beautiful lady to meet the knight’s desires. Her transformation presents all the features associated with Venus’s astrological influence and the Wife’s implicit regret not to possess those qualities (“Allas! Allas! that evere love was sinne!”, line 614). However, the loathly lady embodies Mars’s bad influence and the Wife’s insubordination because her sermon on ‘gentillesse’ is a means through which the old woman educates the knight on some lacking qualities and establishes her authority over him. Her subtle deception of the knight works in the same way as the Wife’s manipulation of her fifth husband, whom she tricks in believing he holds the authority in marriage. Therefore:

She appears (...) like the old woman of her tale: now young (or at least full of energy), now old; now a frightening reminder of death and the limits of human knowledge, now a beneficent donor of life and happiness.²⁰

In conclusion, through her Prologue, the Wife is presented as a human and reliable narrator with whom the audience, to a certain extent, can empathise and identify. “She is so vividly feminine and human, so coarse and shameless in her disclosures of the marital relations with five husbands”,²¹ and her boldness to talk about her life experience, leaving space for ambiguity, is the element that gets her closer to the audience. The more real and tangible a story is, the easier it is for the audience to empathise with it and to create a proper dialogue with the story and the narrator, choosing whether to support or criticise their position and claims.

²⁰ Fradenburg, p. 593.

²¹ Curry, p. 30.

2.2.1. The Wife of Bath and La Vieille from the *Roman de la Rose*

The main source for the Wife of Bath's Prologue and for the portrayal of the loathly lady is Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*. One of the characters of the poem is La Vieille, an old woman who wants to lecture a young maid on how to behave with men and in marriage. However, her teachings do not propose attitudes one would expect women to take on. La Vieille's aim is to subvert the young woman's understanding of men in order to dominate them, using sexual pleasure as a means for domination and changing the desire for love with a stronger need for exploiting men and gain authority over them.²² She represents a challenge towards the antifeminist literature of the time, according to which women were insubordinate talkers and their behaviour was a means they deliberately used to achieve their ends; in doing so, women involuntarily revealed their natural inclination to rebellion.²³ Like the Wife of Bath, she differs from the other interlocutors of the *Roman* because she has "a biography (...), rather than just a set of typifying habits".²⁴ Her personal history is used as a framework to talk about deception, marriage and love: "free from moral considerations, the old woman can be totally frank and spontaneous from the beginning, and this makes her all the more convincing".²⁵ In the Wife's Prologue, Chaucer seems to follow the same line as La Vieille, setting the Wife as an example against antifeminist models of the time. In fact, between the Wife of Bath's Prologue and La Vieille's speech, we notice several similarities, in appearance and in character, in the portrayal of the two women, both of them living in their middle-age.

The first thing La Vieille bitterly points out is the change of her exterior features over the years:

Sachiez, se je fusse ausinc sage,
quant j'estoie de vostre aage,
des geus d'amors con je suis ores
– car de trop grant biauté fui lores,

²² Mieszkowski, Gretchen, "Old Age and Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman", in Classen, Albrecht, ed., *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007, p. 315.

²³ Patterson, Lee, "'For the Wyves love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the Roman de la Rose and the Canterbury Tales", *Speculum*, 58 (1983), pp. 660-661.

²⁴ Patterson, p. 669.

²⁵ Beltrán, Luis, "La Vieille's Past", *Romanische Forschungen*, 84 (1972), p. 89.

mes or m'esteut pleindre et gemir,
quant mon vis esfacié remir
et voi que froncir le covient,
quant de ma biauté me sovient
qui ces vallez fesoit triper...²⁶
(12731–12739)

She starts her discourse from her experience, recalling her lost beauty. In this passage, we can understand her attitude towards the process of aging. She recognises the power her beauty and youth have on men, and she looks at her past with nostalgia, longing for something that she cannot have anymore. When old age comes, and it is explicitly visible, it appears that external beauty is the thing she regrets most and its loss is one of the drawbacks of middle-age. The Wife aligns with her perspective when we read about the relationship with her fourth husband:

But age, allas! that al wol envenyme,
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.
Lat go, farewel! the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namore to telle:
The bren, as I best can, now moste I selle;
But yet to be right mery wol I fonde.
(474-479)

The change of the flour with the bran is a metaphor that highlights the Wife's nostalgic feeling when she recalls her youth, a moment of her life when beauty was her main weapon to deceive men. Now that she is in her middle-age, she must find new means of deception that do not rely on her beautiful features anymore.

The Wife's experience in marriage draws inspiration from La Vieille's love life. Indeed, we can state that Chaucer uses La Vieille's speech as the main source to build the character of the Wife of Bath, as well as the several strategies of deception she used with her husbands. Despite her nostalgia for a lost youth, La Vieille firmly states her right to talk about marriage and considers her experience as a valuable authoritative source:

Bele iere, et jenne et nice et fole,
n'onc ne fui d'Amors a escole
ou l'en leüst la theorique,

²⁶ This is the edition and translation I use to quote *Roman de la Rose*: Correale, Robert M. and Hamel, Mary, eds., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, Volume II*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005. "I tell you, if when I was your age I were as smart about the games lovers play as I am now – for I was a great beauty then, but now I have to moan and complain when I look at my ruined face and see how relentlessly it's wrinkled, and remember how my beauty used to make the young men dance..."

mes je sai tout par la pratique.
Experimenz m'en ont fet sage,
que j'ai hantez tout mon aage.²⁷
(12771-12776)

She also emphasizes the joy of having more than one lover, especially if they can give the woman material possessions (“En pluseurs leus le queur aiez, en un seul leu ja non metez ne nou donez ne ne pretez, mes vendez le bien chierement et torjorz par enchierement”, lines 13008-13012)²⁸ and various strategies to manipulate men by stressing their lack of some qualities or features (“Puis doit la dame sopirer et sai par samblant aïrer, et l'assaille et li queure seure et die que si grant demeure n'a il mie fet sanz reson”, lines 13793-13797).²⁹ To write this part, Jean de Meun used as a model Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, where the poet writes about several teachings for women to follow.³⁰ However, these instructions are not used to reproach women for their behaviour, as they were intentionally created. By giving these instructions to a woman like La Vieille, De Meun distorts the meaning of an authoritative source to employ it as a means of deception. We can notice how the Wife of Bath's Prologue aligns with the same aim, starting with the part regarding the Wife's first three husbands. As previously mentioned, the Wife is able to exercise authority over her first three old husbands by overturning the meaning coming from an authoritative source, Theophrastus's book on marriage. In doing so, her husbands' lack of knowledge becomes the weapon she uses to claim her power over them.

As regards the Wife's fifth husband, their relationship aligns with a passage we can find in La Vieille's speech, when she describes the relationship with one of her lovers:

... tretout donoie a un ribaut,
qui trop de honte me fesoit,
mes c'iert cil qui plus me plesoit.
Les autres touz amis clamoie,
mes li tant seulement amoie;
mes sachiez qu'il ne me prisoit
un pois, et bien le me disoit.

²⁷ “I was pretty, and young and silly and foolish; I never was at school of love where they taught the theory of it – but I know everything from doing it. The experiments I've been conducting all my life have made me smart about it”.

²⁸ “Have your heart in several places: never put it in just one place; don't give it, don't lend it, but sell it good and dear and always to the highest bidder”.

²⁹ “Then a lady has to sigh and seem angry and attack him and badger him, and say that he would never have been so late unless there was a reason”.

³⁰ Correale and Hamel, p. 353.

Mauvés iert, onques ne vi pire,
onc ne me cessa de despire.³¹
(14448-14456)

To a certain extent, the Wife's account of her relationship with Jankin highlights the same feelings. In both cases, the Wife and La Vieille show their authentic desire for this relationship. On the one hand, despite her last lover's violent attitude, La Vieille claims he is the one she loved most, but she recalls the whole experience with a sense of pity, regret and, perhaps, a sense of revenge towards him, because he was the one she could not tame. On the other hand, the Wife of Bath's fifth marriage is the only moment where "she shows that she is capable of love as well as desire",³² showing her human and vulnerable side in contrast to her will to possess authority in marriage. However, I notice a significant difference in the attitude of the two women. La Vieille has shown she can turn her experience into an authoritative means through which she instructs young women on marriage. However, even in this case, she looks at her past with nostalgia, longing for something she was not completely able to do, which is to have authority over men. She is left with the recollection of her experience, used to guide young women but not at her own advantage with future lovers. At the end of her story, we feel compassion for this 'loathly lady' who has given up on men but uses the same experience that caused her misery to praise her youth and to advise women.³³ With the Wife of Bath, I notice a slightly different approach towards her last marriage. Like La Vieille, she has to face an irascible and violent husband, but at the same time she truly desires him. What differs is that the Wife is portrayed as a new model for women of her time, despite her illusions on an impossible love, because she can use her ability of deception to her own advantage. Indeed, when the Wife says: "welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shall!" (45), she highlights her desire towards men, meaning that she is discouraged neither by her old appearance nor by her age. Instead, she shows her ability to

³¹ "I gave it all (the gifts I'd had from earlier lovers) to a louse who did too shameful things to me, and yet he was the one who pleased me most. I called all the others my friends, but he's the only one I loved so much; but I have to say he valued me about as much as a pea, and he used to tell me so. He was bad, I've never seen a worse. He never stopped despising me".

³² Patterson, p. 679.

³³ Beltrán, p. 92.

speak her feminist point of view using Jankin's antifeminist male perspective.³⁴ In this way, her experience, even the bad one, becomes a means through which she can continue to exercise power and authority over men.

In conclusion, La Vieille is an essential source for the construction of the character of the Wife of Bath. What Chaucer does is to start from this source to give a different meaning to the Wife's behaviour in marriage, which reflects her intention to gain sovereignty and to present another perspective different from the male one. In doing so, the Wife already gives the reader some hints regarding the meaning of the loathly lady in her story.

2.3. John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and its Prologue

The second tale under analysis, *Tale of Florent*, is one of the several stories in John Gower's major English poem, *Confessio Amantis*. The protagonist of the poem is Amans, who confesses to Venus's priest, Genius, the sins he committed during his life. The poem explores these sins dividing them in eight books, each of which represents one sin against love and contains a series of stories from the classical tradition that serve as a means through which people can reflect on various forms of love.³⁵ The story is set in the woods, where Amans, disoriented, desperately begs Venus and Cupid for their mercy: "Behold my cause and my querele, and yif me som part of thi grace, so that I may finde in this place if thou be gracious or non" (1.134-137).³⁶ He asks for mercy because he realises that in his life he "has set himself apart from the mutual pleasures of Nature's domain in hope of enjoying singular pleasures".³⁷ After the arrival of Venus and Cupid, Venus introduces Amans to Genius, her priest, who will hear his confession ("I wot miself, bot for al this unto my prest, which

³⁴ Patterson, p. 682.

³⁵ Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *Reading Middle English Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, p. 168.

³⁶ This is the version I use for Book One (and the *Tale of Florent*) of the *Confessio Amantis*: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-book-1>

³⁷ Peck, Russell A., *Confessio Amantis, Volume 1: Introduction*, Retrieved from: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-1-introduction> (accessed June and July 2023).

comth anon, I woll thou telle it on and on, bothe all thi thought and al thi werk”, verses 1.192-195). Genius willingly accepts to hear Amans’s confession and he explains how he will examine each sin through several stories to help the lover understand the real meaning of love, in order to redeem his conscience (“So that I wol nothing forbere, that I the vices on and on ne schal thee schewen everychon; wherof thou myht take evidence to reule with thi conscience”, verses 1.244-248).

The eight books are introduced by a Prologue that Gower inserts as an introduction to all stories. From the Prologue, some elements are useful to understand the historical background of the *Confessio Amantis*. At the beginning we read: “a bok for Engelondes sake, the yer sextenthe of Kyng Richard” (24-25).³⁸ These verses refer to the fourteenth year of King Richard II’s reign, 1390, the year when Gower finished the first version of the *Confessio*. The mention of the King is found in the first version of the Prologue, where Gower also describes the encounter with King Richard II, who requested him to compose something new.³⁹ Gower accepts to write under his patronage because he admires the King’s strength to rule after some disastrous decades characterised by unrest and economic crises, and whose major event was a protest known as the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, which caused several disorders to the whole society.⁴⁰ However, later in the Prologue we find another dedication referring to the latest revised version: “I sende unto myn oghne lord, which of Lancastre is Henri named” (86-87). Here Gower refers to King Richard II’s successor, Henry of Lancaster. His mention may indicate Gower’s disillusionment towards King Richard, whose last years as king were characterised by harsh and tyrannic behaviour towards his subjects.⁴¹ Therefore, the poet may be mentioning Henry of Lancaster because he relies on him to restore order and peace in the country. Despite the uncertainty regarding to whom the poem is dedicated, the Prologue clearly states a

³⁸ This is the version I use for the Prologue of *Confessio Amantis*: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-1-prologue>

³⁹ Biography retrieved from: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11176?rskey=xBWFa4&result=3> (accessed 7 June 2023).

⁴⁰ Peck (Online).

⁴¹ Peck (Online).

dedication to a powerful and influent man of Gower's time, and this perspective aligns the poem with a political aim.

Confessio Amantis belongs to the genre of the consolation, a genre that has an intrinsic didactic aim. Indeed, all stories are *exempla* that Genius employs to teach Amans which attitudes to adopt in order to act properly and to make him aware of the sins against love. Gower's *exempla* are all experiential stories: they present experiences that enable human beings, represented by Amans, to learn what is right and what is wrong, testing their minds as well as their actions.⁴² Gower's intention is to talk about love through "the accessing of the present by reconfiguring the past".⁴³ That is because Genius's intention to change Amans's behaviour will be vain if he does not change in his intellect and uses his memory as a means to hold these teachings. In fact, "Genius emphasizes that the tales are to be held in remembrance, and Amans again and again asks to be questioned so that he might recall what he has forgotten".⁴⁴ For these reasons, Gower's conception of love is moralistic and practical, and it focuses on highlighting the faults of human and earthly love⁴⁵ by presenting several stories that turn into teachings.

Confessio Amantis's Prologue describes Gower's intention to write the poem, which is strongly connected to the choice of genre. It is essential to have an insight on the Prologue because it helps setting the context of interpretation of the *Tale of Florent*:

For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
I wolde go the middel weie
And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
That of the lasse or of the more
Som man mai lyke of that I wryte.
(16-21).

In these first lines, Gower aligns with the didactic aim of the consolation because he says his poem will be entertaining, but also give useful teachings, even though he has not mentioned the topic of the

⁴² Peck (Online).

⁴³ Peck (Online).

⁴⁴ Peck (Online).

⁴⁵ Crépin, André, "Human and Divine Love in Chaucer and Gower", in Dor, Juliette, ed., *A Wyf Ther Was. Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, Liege: L³ - Liege Languages and Literature, 1992, p. 76.

poem yet. To a certain extent, these lines remind us of the tales in the *Canterbury Tales*, because in the General Prologue, the Host sets the rules of the game by establishing that the tales should be both amusing and instructive. However, the two works have two completely different aims. In the following paragraphs, Gower tells his audience about his intent and presents the topic of his poem:

Purpose for to wryte a bok
After the world that whilom tok
Long tyme in olde daies passed.
Bot for men sein it is now lassed,
In worse plit than it was tho,
I thenke for to touche also
The world which neweth every dai,
So as I can, so as I mai.
(53-60).

Here Gower states his intention to talk about the past to learn how his present world can renew itself.

Then, he relates this intention to a specific topic, around which the *Confessio* revolves:

Whan the prologe is so despended,
This bok schal afterward ben ended
Of love, which doth many a wonder
And many a wys man hath put under.
And in this wyse I thenke trete
Towardes hem that now be grete,
Betwen the vertu and the vice
Which longeth unto this office.
(73-80).

The reader finds from the Prologue that love is the topic of Gower's poem. Love is treated by looking at the past to refer to the present, through several stories and experiences that are both entertaining and amusing. These stories are means to give Amans teachings about love and to help him recognise in his life the corruption caused by the seven deadly sins. Gower's intention not only involves an ethical teaching for all human beings, but is also addressed, as stated above, "towardes hem that now be grete" (78): this verse refers to those who held power and authority during his present time. In this sense, love is a topic that Gower employs to write a poem with a double intention: on the one hand, to offer moral teachings to people; on the other hand, to address authorities in society to advocate a change. Consequently, the didactic aim of the genre of consolation involves a personal and public interpretation of love.

Gower's political intention is expanded in the following sections of the Prologue (93-584), where he explicitly addresses the political and social issues of the last years of the fourteenth century, when England was anything but a peaceful country and strict laws were not of benefit to anyone.⁴⁶ In the following paragraphs, I will consider in detail some sections of the Prologue because the *Tale of Florent* depends on it to set its meaning and intention. Indeed, the analysis of the Prologue helps the audience to read the tale through another perspective, using fiction to relate the narrative with an intrinsic political meaning. Firstly, Gower reproaches the State and remarks that it is because of the loss of love that England has been living a period of violence and hatred:

The world is changed overal,
And therof most in special
That love is falle into discord.
And that I take to record
Of every lond, for his partie,
The comune vois which mai noght lie;
Noght upon on, bot upon alle
It is that men now clepe and calle,
And sein the regnes ben divided:
In stede of love is hate guided,
The werre wol no pes purchase,
And lawe hath take hire double face,
So that justice out of the weie
With ryhtwisnesse is gon aweie.
(119-132).

These lines outline Gower's discontent towards the political system of the time, hinting at the numerous internal conflicts among the King and his supporters. He addresses the Monarchy stating that the King's interest in his benefits led him to pursue hatred to hold power and authority, rather than choosing love, wisdom, and justice.

Secondly, Gower addresses the Church with a longer section, outlining the Christian Church's detachment from its values:

Whan Crist Himself hath bode pes
And set it in His Testament,
How now that holy cherche is went
Of that here lawe positif
Hath set, to make werre and strif
For worldes good, which may noght laste.
(244-249)

⁴⁶ Peck (Online).

Here Gower accuses the Church of being more interested in gaining profit from material goods, rather than following its moral laws, and its selfishness has led the Church to pursue war and violence, as the Monarchy did. This passage is a clear attack on the Church's attachment to material possessions and its inability to follow what Christ stated in the gospels ("blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God", Matthew, 5:9). In another section, Gower highlights the contradictory behaviour of priests and churchmen:

For if men loke in holy cherche,
Betwen the word and that thei werche
Ther is a full gret difference.
Thei prechen ous in audience
That no man schal his soule empeire,
For al is bot a chirie feire
This worldes good, so as thei telle
(449-455)

Who that here wordes understode,
It thenkth thei wolden do the same;
Bot yet betwen earnest and game
Ful ofte it torneth otherwise.
With holy tales thei devise
How meritoire is thilke dede
Of charité, to clothe and fede
The povere folk and for to parte
The worldes good, bot thei departe
Ne thenken nocht fro that thei have.
(460-469)

Their position asks them to be the first to be charitable and generous, providing people with models to follow through their experiences of faith. However, their actions tell otherwise, because they manipulate their fundamental moral precepts to sell indulgences and make money out of their acts of charity. They demonstrate their inability to be expression of the same love God proclaims in the Scriptures and, on the contrary, they fall under the corruption of the human world and desires. The attack on the corruption of the Church is not only a reproach Gower addresses to the Church as an institution, but also reflects how every human being, even churchmen, is corruptible to sin against love.

The last critic Gower presents is towards the commoners:

And natheles yet som men wryte
And sein that fortune is to wyte,
And som men holde oppinion
That it is constellacion,

Which causeth al that a man doth.
God wot of bothe which is soth.
(529-534)

Gower does not criticise only those who exercise influence and power in society, because it would mean justifying everyone else's behaviour and assigning the responsibility of order, peace and justice only to restricted and privileged groups. Instead, Gower accuses the commoners of being responsible for the fortunes of society in order to challenge the conception of a world dominated by fortune and fate. He mentions the commoners to address human beings who do not believe their actions and attitudes can have some consequences on society. Humans are the makers of both their fortunes and misfortunes, and to hold only the State and the Church responsible for the ruin of society would mean excusing people from any responsibility to act according to reason, justice, and love:

And fro the ferste regne of alle
Into this day, hou so befallle,
Of that the regnes ben muable
The man himself hath be coupable,
Which of his propre governance
Fortuneth al the worldes chance.
(579-584)

The consideration of the political and social situation of his society emphasises Gower's intention to address both the critical time he lives in and the corruptible nature of human beings. The Prologue already offers an example of a story with a didactic aim. Gower reports the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream about a strange creature made of several elements; he asks the prophet Daniel to interpret this vision:

His hed with al the necke also
Thei were of fin gold bothe tuo;
His brest, his schuldres, and his armes
Were al of selver, bot the tharmes,
The wombe, and al doun to the kne,
Of bras thei were upon to se;
The legges were al mad of stiel,
So were his feet also somdiel,
And somdiel part to hem was take
Of erthe which men pottes make.
(605-614)

The following sections outline Gower's intent to address both the crisis of his time and human nature with this story. Daniel's interpretation assigns to each element an age in history, characterised by an initial prosperity and a final downfall. He refers to the present time, made of earth and steel,

highlighting its instability and decay (“upon the feet of erthe and stiel so stant this world now everydiel (...) and that is for to rewe sore, for alway siththe more and more the world empeireth every day”, verses 827-828, 831-833), and this metaphor relates to later verses (“the man is cause of alle wo, why this world is divided so”, verses 965-966). Unable to act according to love, human nature is the cause of all divisions on earth, both political and spiritual:

Which ferst began in Paradis.
For ther was proeved what it is,
And what desese there it wroghte;
For thilke werre tho forth broghte
The vice of alle dedly sinne,
Thurgh which division cam inne
Among the men in erthe hier
(1005-1011)

Overall, the Prologue offers an insight on how the multiple exemplary stories found in the *Confessio Amantis* engage people to consider love, in its several manifestations, at the core of every action. In particular, he invites the State, the Church, and people to act in order to avoid the corruption of society and of one’s morality.

The configuration of the Prologue of the *Confessio Amantis* creates a clear contrast with the Wife’s Prologue in the *Canterbury Tales*. Their differences allow us to propose some interpretations that help define the meaning of the loathly lady in the two stories. The previous analysis of the Wife’s Prologue has shown how Chaucer never explicitly criticises his society: instead, he uses devices such as irony and parody that allow him to create ambiguous spaces of interpretation, rather than certainties. The Wife of Bath is the representation of this attitude. She is described as an insubordinate woman who offers a new and unconventional model for women in medieval society, and this model is reflected in the figure of the loathly lady in her tale. However, her model is not presented as a direct reproach of the medieval society’s representation of women. That is because the Wife is often criticised by other tellers, who repeatedly question her attitude and beliefs and make it difficult for her to be considered an authoritative source of knowledge. We cannot deny that the model the Wife proposes is provocative, but it does not entirely represent Chaucer’s attitude toward society. The evaluation of what is right and what is wrong is left to the readers, who can choose whether the Wife’s

model and her loathly lady represent their opinion or not, thanks to Chaucer's ambiguity in portraying the female characters. Looking at Gower, his Prologue contains an explicit critique towards society, highlighting multiple forms of corruption and disorder that contribute to the downfall of morality, laws, and justice. With his poem, Gower wants to advocate a change of mentality, and he does that by placing the corruptible nature of medieval society in a larger framework, that of the instability of human nature. Given these premises in the Prologue, Gower's *exempla* in the *Confessio Amantis* become teachings we must follow in order to pursue a change, because they "have the capacity to "wed" people in a tie that, despite turbulent times, could reunite social practices with ideologies".⁴⁷ In this sense, love becomes not only the basis of human nature, but also the starting point from which society can change. When looking specifically at the *Tale of Florent*, which will be further discussed, it is important to bear in mind this perspective of the Prologue. In fact, the loathly lady becomes a metaphor to describe both the disorders within society and the confusion of human nature. With the Prologue, Gower asks his audience "to find the political in the fairy tale by properly connecting the dots",⁴⁸ and to look at the loathly lady from this perspective. This first insight into the *Tale of Florent* already shows us a difference between this story and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. On the one hand, the *Wife's Tale* is introduced by a Prologue that focuses on the role of women and proposes a new unconventional model for the time; consequently, the *Tale* emphasises the role and meaning of female characters, the loathly lady above all, because of the influence of the Prologue. On the other hand, the Prologue of the *Confessio Amantis* makes it clear how the reflection upon women in medieval society is not the aim of the *Tale of Florent* and its loathly lady.

⁴⁷ Peck (Online).

⁴⁸ Yeager, R.F., "The Politics of *Strengthe* and *Vois* in Gower's Loathly Lady Tale", in Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Carter, Susan, eds., *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales. Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, p. 51.

2.4. Introduction to the *Tale of Florent*

The *Tale of Florent* is found in the first book of the *Confessio Amantis*, which sets the story and begins exploring the first sin against love: Pride. Book One presents Pride through a series of stories representing various manifestations of the same sin. Through the stories, we find Pride treated as Hypocrisy, Disobedience, Murmur and Complaint, Presumption, Boasting and Vainglory. Each narrative presents characters facing a quest that always involves a riddle, and they find themselves to rely on their moral judgment to solve it.⁴⁹ Indeed, Pride refers to those people who consider themselves better than others because of certain qualities they have or that others lack of. There is a connection between Pride and the several challenges found in these stories. Pride deals with one's personal morality, but more importantly with one's inability to recognise what is right and what is wrong. This attitude affects people in way that makes them believe to be superior or more suited than others in certain situations. Every challenge puts the various characters in a position where they have to question their Pride and their desire for supremacy, challenging themselves and their morality. Their moral change depends only on their ability to recognise their mistaken behaviour and how they have been blinded by Pride.

The *Tale of Florent* is a story that considers Pride as Murmur and Complaint. It is introduced by an exchange between Amans and Genius, which helps contextualise this interpretation of Pride in the tale. Genius first explains the meaning of Murmur and Complaint within a relationship:

Ther be lovers, that thogh thei have
Of love al that thei wolde crave,
Yit wol thei grucche be som weie,
That thei wol noght to love obeie
Upon the trowthe, as thei do scholde;
And if hem lacketh that thei wolde,
Anon thei falle in such a peine,
That evere unbuxomly thei pleigne
Upon fortune, and curse and crie,
That thei wol noght here hertes plie
To soffre til it betre falle.
(1.1361-1371)

⁴⁹ Peck (Online).

He states how lovers, when living a meaningful relationship, would often complain about something and try to find faults in their relationship instead of trusting each other. Therefore, Murmur and Complaint refers to this specific attitude. In response, Amans readily confesses how he would behave this way towards his wife, but he would not say anything to her because he feels in his heart he is not being truthful to the promise of obedience he made to her. Genius's following words already describe the core of the lesson against Pride he wants to offer with the *Tale of Florent*: to be obedient and faithful, even in conflicting situations, is one of the greatest acts of love that can be stronger than any human inclinations:

What so befall of other weie,
That thou to loves heste obeie
Als ferr as thou it myht suffise:
For ofte sithe in such a wise
Obedience in love availleth,
Wher al a mannes strengthe failleth
(1.1397-1402)

This exchange aligns the *Tale of Florent* with the topic Gower presents in the Prologue, and it also highlights the connection between the narratives of all books and the general aim of the poem: to give meaningful teachings about love. That is because, despite the different stories taken from several sources, all *exempla* follow the same topic and they all contribute to educate Amans about attitudes to avoid and to adopt. Taking a closer look at Book One, the *Tale of Florent* cannot disregard the presence of other stories dealing with Pride. Even though they present different plots, their meanings are not in conflict with one another, and they can be understood only if the tales are considered part of the same group aligning with the same intention, which is giving *exempla* against Pride. It is thanks to this connection between the tales that Pride maintains a coherent meaning throughout the stories. The same cannot be said for the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which is inserted in an equally diverse collection of tales, but in the *Canterbury Tales* each teller deals with a different topic: instead of sharing the same intention, all tellers have their motivations to deal with a specific topic, which is usually connected to their social class, and between tellers contrasts and discussions often emerge. Indeed,

the *Wife of Bath's Tale* represent only one of the multiple matters tackled in the *Canterbury Tales* and, as highlighted in the section dedicated to the Wife's Prologue, it generates debates among the tellers.

The exchange between Amans and Genius before the story opens the discussion on another important aspect: the role of the narrator in the *Tale of Florent*, and in this case, in the *Confessio Amantis* in general. For this section, the comparison with the Wife of Bath is needed to further expand the differences between the two texts. The first book of the *Confessio* also sets some elements regarding the style of the narrator, which is maintained throughout the poem. The narrator of all tales is Genius, and his role as confessor already puts him in an uninvolved position because his office asks him to keep a distance from any sinful action he describes in his tales. Moreover, when at the beginning of Book One Venus tells Amans that Genius will be his confessor, she implicitly presents him as a man of great knowledge, able to provide Amans with the answers he needs. These elements define Genius as an omniscient narrator with whom the reader cannot emphasise or relate. His task and aim are to provide useful teachings on love that cannot be questioned, and he can be a reliable and authoritative source of knowledge only if he is completely detached from the topic. Moreover, detachment becomes an essential attribute if we consider that the *Tale of Florent* offers moral lessons not only to improve human nature, but also to press authorities and institutions for a change. Genius's disengagement from the tale is also perceived in the way he talks to Amans. He does not show any personal emotions, nor does he feel empathy towards the lover. His lack of empathy is connected to his role as priest and confessor. He does not display any kind of emotion because he must show Amans he has not been corrupted by the sins he presents with the stories. Instead, he limits himself to giving Amans examples to follow. Consequently, "for the Confessor, the tale is only an *exemplum*: it shows the usefulness of obedience in love but no more. He has no personal interest in any of the characters",⁵⁰ especially towards the man he advises. If we look at the Wife of Bath as narrator, the analysis of her Prologue has highlighted a strong involvement of the Wife in her Tale and, more

⁵⁰ Fischer, Olga C.M., "Gower's Tale of Florent and Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale: A Stylistic Comparison", *English Studies*, 3 (1985), pp. 205-206.

specifically, with the topic. She shows her personal engagement with the topic of marriage by showing a different range of emotions, such as anger, nostalgia, regret, pride, and amusement. This diverse group of feelings makes it easier for the audience to empathise with the woman, because she shows she is human. Also, because she talks about her life, she is able to involve them more personally, even if it is only to disagree with her. In her attitude, another difference with the narrator of the *Confessio* can be highlighted. If Genius's aim is to give Amans undisputable truths about love, and these teachings are never questioned throughout the poem, the same cannot be said for the Wife of Bath. The Wife claims her position is authoritative because she considers her experience in marriage enough to be entitled to talk about it. However, rather than giving didactic teachings, she proposes a new model for women of her time, but this model is far from being considered a fixed truth. The Wife is interrupted several times through her Prologue and questioned by some tellers, who are not afraid to challenge her point of view. For this reason, it is easier for the audience to get involved in the story and in the topic, because they can recognise themselves in those tellers who interact with her and decide whether the Wife's model responds to their opinions or not. The Wife's personal involvement is also visible when she tells her tale: she does not limit herself to telling the story, but she adds personal opinions and comments, interrupting the narrative.

In the end, the experience the Wife claims as authoritative, despite being successfully used to holding authority in marriage, is not enough for the society she lives in. She is just one of the multiple voices of a diverse group of tellers, each of whom shows a different perspective on different topics, and her portrayal of the loathly lady remains in an ambiguous position, neither accepted nor denied. By contrast, Genius is the only authority of the *Confessio* that voices an objective truth by offering Amans multiple examples to change his morality. In particular, the loathly lady in Gower becomes a means through which the teaching is transmitted.

2.4.1. The Wife of Bath's and Genius's styles of narration

When looking at the different narrators in the two stories, it is important to consider not only what they say, but also how they say it. Indeed, one last element to explore is the relationship between the narrator and the story from a stylistic and linguistic point of view. That is because the style of narration reflects the aim of the narrator and, consequently, the distinct meanings of the loathly lady in Chaucer and in Gower. The starting point of these considerations is the difference already highlighted between the emotional involvement of the Wife of Bath as narrator in her Tale, and the lack of empathy and engagement showed by Genius. This distinction implies different linguistic and stylistic choices, which are more structural elements of the tale, but they are very useful to understand the meaning of the two narratives. In this section, I briefly consider the two 'loathly lady' tales only to focus on the language employed, in order to highlight how language reflects the attitude of the two narrators towards the topic of the tales.

The narrations of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Tale of Florent* have been defined in two different ways. The Wife's style is considered baroque, "emotive, committed, excited"⁵¹, whereas Genius's stylistic choices are classical, "calm, detached, orderly".⁵² There are some elements, treated differently in the two tales, which underline this stylistic difference and help understand the distinction between an engaged narrator and an uninvolved one. The first element is the structure of sentences. In her essay, Fischer analyses the initial speeches of the Queen in Chaucer (900-912) and of the noblewoman in Gower (1.1453-1471), describing the moment when the knight is almost sentenced to death. Her study highlights differences in the construction of the sentences. Sentences in Chaucer are shorter, simpler, highlighting a certain degree of spontaneity; in Gower's version, the noblewoman uses longer periods, more complex in the structure; such periods emphasise an attentively crafted speech.⁵³ On the one hand, the Wife's use of shorter periods represents her personal

⁵¹ Fischer, p. 216.

⁵² Fischer, p. 216.

⁵³ Fischer, pp. 212-213.

involvement in her story and also underlines her emotional engagement with the topic: when a person is emotionally involved in a matter, to prepare in advance what one has to say is rather impossible, because speech is influenced by emotions. On the other, Gower's carefully controlled sentences represent Genius's need to remain detached from the topic as much as possible, because the stronger is the detachment, the easier it is for him to give Amans meaningful teachings.

The second difference is found in the use of direct speech. The Wife uses direct speech quite often: "whenever there is direct speech, there is a lively interchange between two characters".⁵⁴ In particular, the exchanges between the knight and the old hag are characterised by a strong involvement of both characters, each of whom shows different emotions. Genius prefers a narration with less interaction between characters, and he uses a lot of reported speech and descriptions, especially when he talks about the knight's interior dilemma at the end of the story. The absence of emotions is peculiar to Genius's style as narrator, and it can be seen in his interactions with Amans: rather than a real exchange, it looks like a monologue, because Amans passively receives Genius's teachings.

The third difference involves all common features shared between the two tales, such as the encounter with the loathly lady, the marriage dilemma, and the final transformation of the ugly woman, as well as their different organization within the same storyline. Throughout her tale, the Wife creates a sensation of suspension and ambiguity inserting elements such as her personal comments on the tale and the sermon on 'gentillesse' that interrupt the narrative. Moreover, suspension is also achieved through the loathly lady, who does not reveal straightaway her intention of marriage to the knight. Her style represents Chaucer's intent to have more than one interpretation on the unconventional female model proposed by the Wife. By contrast, Genius presents the story without interruptions or comments, because he wants to be as straightforward as possible with Amans

⁵⁴ Fischer, p. 210.

when giving him models to imitate. If lessons against Pride have to be transmitted and learned, there can be no space left for ambiguity.

The two narrators represent the aim of the two tales even from a linguistic perspective. Genius's style of narration reflects the aim Gower gives to the *Confessio Amantis*. With the *Tale of Florent*, Genius shows Amans that "love should be ruled by reason and regulated by laws",⁵⁵ which is also the final message Gower wants to convey with his poem: consequently, a tale that wants to transmit this idea of love must be orderly written, using some linguistic devices that reflect this aim. Instead, the Wife's narration is driven by feelings, and "her disorderly and emotive 'elocutio' perfectly fits her character"⁵⁶ and the new model she proposes to women. The linguistic choices made by Chaucer also reflect the subjective point of view of the Wife, as well as the ambiguity Chaucer creates around her character and her tale, with which he does neither agree nor disagree.

⁵⁵ Fischer, p. 223.

⁵⁶ Fischer, p. 224.

3. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Tale of Florent*: a comparative analysis

3.1. The loathly lady: external appearance and expectations

The previous considerations on the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and on the narrative framework of the *Confessio Amantis* allow me to have a strong starting point from which to analyse the two 'loathly lady' tales. The first element to take into consideration is her external appearance. Before examining the two tales in detail and considering the common elements and differences, it is important to start from her physical traits, because they give the reader a first image of the loathly lady that contribute to give a meaning to her actions. Moreover, this first analysis expands the historical and cultural considerations of the first chapter, relating them to the motif of the loathly lady.

In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, there are not extensive descriptions of the old hag's appearance. The first time the knight meets the loathly lady, the Wife provides a brief comment of her aspect: "no creature saugh he that bar lyf, save on the grene he saugh sittinge a wyf – a fouler wight ther may no men devyse" (997-999). Apart from this description, there are other lines where the Wife gives some images of her external features, but she does not provide many details: expressions such as "my leve mooder" (1005), "so wo was him, his wyf looked so foule" (1082), and "now, sire, of elde ye repreve me" (1207) are all general terms that describe the loathly lady as old, ugly and poor, but they do not provide any additional details. I propose two interpretations related to the lack of extensive descriptions. The first is connected to the Wife's personal involvement in the tale: in fact, it is not the knight who provides these descriptions, but the Wife, and her engagement to the tale may influence the presentation she gives of the old hag because she implicitly identifies with the loathly lady. The choice to give less information about her physical traits suggests that the Wife does not want to give any detail about her appearance, either because she feels embarrassed about her lost youth, or because she does not want the audience to focus on these details, but rather on the loathly lady's actions and words. I consider the second option more valuable than the hypothesis of the Wife's embarrassment, because it is in line with the aim of her tale: to provide a new and unconventional model for women

of her time. The second interpretation connects the loathly lady with stereotypes and expectations on middle-aged women during medieval times. Women in their middle age were considered old and ugly because they started to lose their potentialities, such as beauty or fertility. What the Wife does with her loathly lady is to change the image and meaning of the middle-aged woman, who can benefit from this period of her life through other means without relying only on her physical appearance. Therefore, the loathly lady is voluntarily described with few adjectives because they do not give any specific detail about her physical appearance, and they allow to discuss the meaning of old age through other perspectives of interpretation. In this way, the Wife successfully presents a model for women that distances from stereotypes regarding women's external appearance and gives more importance to actions and words.

In the *Tale of Florent*, we find the opposite situation. Here Gower provides a long description of the loathly lady's external image, focusing on several details. Gower inserts this description when Florent has already met the loathly lady and returns in the woods to keep his promise to marry her:

Florent his wofull heved uplefte
And syh this vecke wher sche sat,
Which was the lothlieste what
That evere man caste on his yhe:
Hire nase bass, hire browes hyhe,
Hire yhen smale and depe set,
Hire chekes ben with teres wet,
And rivelen as an emty skyn
Hangende down unto the chin,
Hire lippes schrunken ben for age,
Ther was no grace in the visage.
Hir front was nargh, hir lockes hore,
Sche loketh forth as doth a More,
Hire necke is schort, hir schuldres courbe -
That myhte a mannes lust destourbe!
Hire body gret and nothing smal,
And schortly to describe hire al,
Sche hath no lith withoute a lak.
(1.1674-1691).

This description reflects Florent's regret after agreeing to marry the hag. Through Florent's thoughts, Gower gives a precise image of old age, which aligns with the audience's expectations on the loathly lady as a character. The motif is generally associated with physical traits that vividly represent her ugliness and old age: dry and wrinkled skin, watery eyes, hoary hair, and a hunchback. As in the case

of Chaucer, I suggest some interpretations on the meaning of the loathly lady's appearance. The first is related to the general aim of the *Confessio Amantis*. The ugliness of the loathly lady is a metaphor that Gower uses to address the society he strongly criticises in the Prologue. Authorities and institutions are not able to grant prosperity and justice to the country, and the old hag's hideousness represents the inability to recognise the corruption of society and to take action to solve the problem. At the same time, it is the starting point from which one should try to make a change. The loathly lady's hideous appearance also reflects a personal point of view, and it refers to the frailty of human nature, easily corrupted by vice. Therefore, the change Gower presents, as stated in the Prologue, has also a moral value. The second interpretation is connected to the first, and it refers to the reasons why Gower decides to provide a detailed description of the woman's physical appearance. Gower is not interested in discussing the condition of women in medieval society, and for this reason his image of the loathly lady is connected neither to the topic nor to stereotypes concerning old age or women. The motif is only a means Gower uses to tackle other matters he feels more urgent. In this sense, he aligns the loathly lady with the genre of consolation, giving the motif a didactic aim.

Since the loathly lady is a well-known motif, it creates several expectations on the character and on her behaviour in the story. Her external appearance is essential to build these assumptions, because the audience associates the woman's ugliness to certain behaviours and actions she is expected to fulfil. In the collective imagination of medieval society, an ugly woman is always associated with magical powers. The possession of magical abilities is connected to some cultural beliefs claiming that old women possess a peculiar knowledge accessible only to them. This commonplace is confirmed in both tales, as in the end the loathly lady is able to transform into a beautiful lady. In both narratives, the magical transformation is a metaphor, but it changes its meaning according to the aim of the loathly lady. In Chaucer, her ugliness represents the access to a knowledge that allows women to possess certain abilities, such as the opportunity to deceive men. Therefore, the loathly lady in the Wife's Tale confirms the existence of certain beliefs regarding women's knowledge and how women can benefit from them to hold their authority. By contrast, in Gower the loathly

lady's appearance creates a distance from women's abilities and knowledge, and it overturns its meaning. Her final transformation does not refer to the role of women in marriage, but it is related to the knight's need for a moral change, representing both the personal and the political spheres Gower addresses with his story.

Given these premises, it is clear how the initial expectations of the audience towards the loathly lady are challenged in both narratives. We can say that both Chaucer and Gower set the same expectations: depicting the loathly lady as old and ugly, with differently detailed descriptions, the audience expects the lady to transform at the end of the story. I propose two readings of these assumptions, showing a difference between the two tales. Chaucer strongly challenges the general beliefs of the motif because the story is narrated from a subjective point of view, the one of the Wife of Bath. To a certain extent, the motif still functions according to the tradition, because in the end, the transformation occurs. However, what makes the expectations crumble is the agency given to the loathly lady, who becomes the protagonist of the story. She is the representation of the Wife's perspective as well as of her personality, because the Wife uses the loathly lady to interpret life according to her point of view:

This leads her to tell a traditional story of the 'loathly lady' in a wholly typical and individual way, which is totally distinct in tone from all the other surviving versions. (...) She is telling the story because she wishes to make a moral point which has relevance in the world as she sees it, but in telling it in the way she does she exposes much of her own character.¹

As concerns Gower, his 'loathly lady' tale is inserted in the didactic framework of the *Confessio Amantis*. Gower leaves no space for subjectivity, since it has to provide lessons against Pride. For this reason, in his story the motif generally follows the expectations, despite some minor changes related to the genre of the poem. Moreover, the story remains man-centred, as expected from the pattern of the loathly lady; the audience follows Florent's journey and has an insight into his moral change. Therefore, the loathly lady only serves as a means through which Florent's moral transformation occurs. These considerations align with the role of Genius, who is an omniscient narrator but detached

¹ Slade, Tony, "Irony in the Wife of Bath's Tale", *The Modern Language Review*, 64 (1969), p. 242.

from any kind of personal involvement in the story. It is also for this reason that the tale focuses on Florent's character, rather than on the loathly lady.

Overall, the loathly lady's appearance and the audience's expectations share a strong connection that gives a first interpretation on the character of the loathly lady, and different descriptions of the old hag have highlighted the distinct meaning of the motif in each narrative.

3.2. The distortion of the genre of romance

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Tale of Florent* share several elements which connect the two narratives to the genre of the romance. These common features allow the audience to build associations between the story and the genre, because they are elements traditionally employed to build a romance and they create some expectations about the development of the narrative. However, both Chaucer and Gower distance from the traditional conception of romance and they change its meaning according to the aim they give to their representation of the loathly lady.

In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the first lines explicitly mention the setting of the story, confirming the genre of the Arthurian romance. However, this description already highlights some changes and ambiguities:

In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
All was this land fulfild of fayerye.
The elf-queen with hir joly companye
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
This was the olde opinion, as I rede –
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago –
But now can no man see none elves mo.
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of limitours and othere holy freres,
That serchen every lond and every strem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessinge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes –
This maketh that ther been no fayeryes.
(857-872)

The first impression created by these lines is the absolute irrelevance of the tale in the context of the Wife's Prologue. In fact, the mention of King Arthur's past times seems to align the story with the

traditional conception of romance,² creating expectations on the existence of a hierarchy between men and women, according to which men occupy a dominant position. It appears that with her story, she wants to nostalgically recall a lost past, but these assumptions are in contrast with the Wife's insubordinate nature and beliefs described in her Prologue. However, the following mention of the corrupted nature of friars emphasises the Wife's use of irony to subvert the meaning of romance, and it also creates a connection between her Tale and the Prologue, at first impossible to identify. The Wife compares the old world, filled with fairies and magic, with her present world, where friars roam the country and cause the disappearance of fairies. In the old world she mentions, "pleasure and women are not opposed to truth or honor, but are rather their inseparable companions or even embodiments".³ With this interpretation of the past, the Wife drastically changes the meaning of gender hierarchies within the genre of romance, giving women more agency and power over themselves and over men. Through romance, the Wife seems to take revenge on men who humiliate women, especially those who demeaned her personally.⁴ Moreover, the Wife uses Arthurian romance not only to claim female agency, but also to stress what does not work in the traditional dynamics of a courtly romance. When the Wife mentions King Arthur's court, when the knight is sentenced to death, the courtly environment is a world where women are in charge, and the king knows that the Queen is rightfully entitled to have authority over the knight's fate.⁵ The Wife uses the genre to highlight the inadequacy of male supremacy within the literary genre and, at the same time, she uses these elements to refer to a larger framework, her contemporary society. The fact that she sets the story in a fictitious environment may indicate that her tale cannot be taken seriously, and neither can the Wife's claims and intentions. In fact, what the Wife is doing is exploiting a fairy-tale environment

² Slade, p. 243.

³ Fradenburg, Louise O. [Aranye], "'Fulfil'd of Fairye': The Social Meaning of Fantasy in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale", in Beidler, Peter G., ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath*, Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996. Reprinted in Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales. Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, eds. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson, New York: Norton, 2018, p. 601.

⁴ Wurtele, Douglas J., "Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Her Distorted Arthurian Motifs", *Arthurian Interpretations*, 2 (1987), p. 58.

⁵ Slade, p. 244.

to tackle serious matters, such as the role of women in society and in marriage. In fact, “the Wife might be dreaming of the good old days, but (...) she is doing so because her modern world is troublesome”,⁶ and changing the meaning of the literary conventions contribute to achieve her intent. These interpretations on the Wife’s subversion of romance give an explanation to the initial confusion between the realism of the Prologue and the fiction of the Tale. She may not seem the perfect fit to tell this tale, but since the tale goes against courtly conventions using irony, in the end the genre suits the Wife’s insubordinate behaviour. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore Chaucer’s role as narrator, who may be using irony as well by letting the Wife telling her tale and assigning her a genre that does not belong to her.

The *Tale of Florent* is related to the genre of the romance because it shares some elements that the audience recognises as part of the pattern. However, we cannot say the story aligns with the Arthurian tradition because Gower changes its setting. Since the story uses the motif of the loathly lady, it cannot belong to the classical tradition like other tales of the *Confessio Amantis*, but there are a few elements that suggest a change of environment and historical period. The first element is found in the Latin marginals at the beginning of the tale, where Gower reports that Florent was the nephew of the Emperor Claudius (“Florencius tunc Imperatoris Claudi Nepos”); the second is the mention of Sicily (“the kinges dowhter of Cizile”, verse 1.1841) as the birthplace of the loathly lady.⁷ Given these premises, romance is used in a classical environment, setting the story during Roman times, but preserving some common elements typical of the courtly tradition. Gower’s decision is connected to the general aim of the *Confessio*, which involves a critique towards the political and social disorders under King Richard II’s reign. However, he avoids being too explicit in addressing specific political matters, as he does with other tales. With the *Tale of Florent*, Gower proposes the story as part of the

⁶ Fradenburg, p. 603.

⁷ Yeager, R.F., “The Politics of *Strengthe* and *Vois* in Gower’s Loathly Lady Tale”, in Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Carter, Susan, eds., *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales. Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, p. 49.

classical tradition because in this way the audience is forced not to use its understanding of the Arthurian narratives, values and conventions to understand the story.⁸

These considerations help to draw some conclusions, relating the loathly lady with the genre of romance. In Chaucer's version, the Wife uses the romance changing the assumptions regarding the courtly dynamics and the loathly lady, in order to adapt them to her point of view. In Gower's tale, the use of elements from the Arthurian tradition in a different environment helps the author not to be too direct in his critique toward society.

3.3. The knight, the quest, and the loathly lady

This section will examine the first part of the 'loathly lady' tales, considering the presentation of the knight, the quest he undertakes, the encounter with the loathly lady and the solution of the riddle. These elements altogether set the story and the characters, and are part of the first quest the knight is asked to fulfil: to find the answer to the question 'what women most desire'.

Both tales start with a crime, different in nature, of which the knight is held responsible. The two different crimes are strictly connected to the descriptions of the knight, because they contribute to define the features of his character. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the character of the knight is revealed through the crime he commits, rape:

And so bifel that this King Arthour
Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelere,
That on a day cam rydinge fro river;
And happed that, allone as he was born,
He saugh a mayde walkinge him biforn,
Of whiche mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force he rafte hir maydenheed.
(882-888)

The insertion of the rape scene does not open the discussion on the act committed by the knight. By contrast, rape is used as a motivation to set the story and, more importantly, to reveal the knight's nature, which defines him apart from the rape. The knight, described as "lusty bachelere" (883), is

⁸ Yeager, p. 51.

“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”.⁹ In this sense, rape not only reveals the corruption behind the courtly system and chivalric values, but also presents the knight as the representation of male domination over women. Indeed, rape “speaks to the Wife’s ongoing concern with sovereignty”¹⁰ because it represents her protest against the common assumptions about male privilege in a situation of male domination and female oppression.¹¹ Moreover, the fact that the knight remains nameless further highlights the Wife’s intention to address male authority in general.

In the *Tale of Florent*, Florent’s description apparently aligns with chivalric conventions and courtly values:

Ther was whilom be daies olde
A worthi knyht, and as men tolde
He was nevoeu to th’emperour
And of his court a courteour.
Wifles he was, Florent he hihte.
He was a man that mochel myhte;
Of armes he was desirous,
Chivalerous and amorous,
And for the fame of worldes speche,
Strange aventures for to seche,
He rod the marches al aboute.
(1.1407-1417)

Florent is described as a mighty knight, but he is also described as wifeless (“wifles”, verse 1.1411), in search of satisfying his amorous pleasures, and eager to fight and use violence. Florent’s behaviour has drawn away from the obedience and the loyalty required from his role, and he behaves in an exhibitionistic manner, hoping to acquire fame.¹² His proud attitude led him to accidentally kill another knight, Branchus. In fact, his wandering through lands is not without an aim, but he is searching “for just the kind of reputation-building combat with a worthy opponent that he finds in

⁹ Roppolo, Joseph P., “The Converted Knight in Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’”, *College English*, 12 (1951), p. 266.

¹⁰ Crane, Susan, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 123.

¹¹ Colmer, Dorothy, “Character and Class in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 72 (1973), p. 332.

¹² Peck, Russell A., “Folklore and Powerful Women in Gower’s ‘Tale of Florent’”, in Passmore, S. Elizabeth and Carter, Susan, eds., *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales. Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, p. 108.

Branchus”,¹³ in order to prove his worth, strength and power. However, when Florent encounters the man’s family, he realises his pride has led him to corruption, because he thought his title could empower him to behave according to his judgement. This first insight in Florent’s character already shows Gower’s intention to give lessons against Pride, because Florent is the representation of the human nature easily corrupted by vice.

In both stories, the crime the knight commits leads him to undertake a quest, which is given by a female figure. The quest is the same: both knights have to answer to the riddle ‘what women most desire’, but the circumstances, as well as the knight’s attitude in front of the quest, are different. In Chaucer’s version, the Queen is in charge of the knight’s fate, taking the King’s place in political matters (“and yaf him to the quene al at hir wille, to chese whether she wolde him save or spille”, lines 897-898), and paradoxically she is the one that spares the knight’s life:

“Thou standest yet”, quod she, “in swich array
That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.
I grante thee lyf, if thou canst tellen me
What thing is it that wommen most desyren.
Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from yren.”
(902-906)

The Queen has mercy upon the knight, because she does not want him dead, but at the same time she gives him the riddle to prove his worth and to make him understand that men’s authoritative position is not always granted:

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.¹⁴

Once more, this passage highlights the Wife’s intention to give authority to women and to overturn all assumptions on men’s authority. The knight’s reaction shows his discontent towards the Queen’s decision (“wo was this knight and sorwefully he syketh. But what! he may not do al as him lyketh”, lines 913-914) but nonetheless he takes on the quest to save himself. There are no other motivations that draw the knight to pursue his quest rather than saving his life: he does not say anything to the

¹³ Yeager, p. 53.

¹⁴ Roppolo, p. 266.

Queen when she gives him the riddle, and despite his discomfort, he accepts his fate because he knows it is the only way he can hope to survive. His lack of resistance further underlines how he “values life above honor”,¹⁵ and how the quest is not perceived as a means through which to redeem himself from the crime he committed, but only as his only chance of survival. Therefore, the Wife presents a male character that goes against courtly values and takes on a quest with the wrong intentions. Moreover, the quest is not connected to the crime the knight has committed, because it further highlights the Wife’s intention to give authority to women, overturning all assumptions on men’s power.

In Gower’s version, the quest is given with a different purpose. After committing the crime, Florent is summoned by Branchus’s grandmother, and the following passage describes the woman’s attitude towards the knight:

Ther was a lady, the slyheste
Of alle that men knewe tho,
So old sche myhte unethes go,
And was grantdame unto the dede:
And sche with that began to rede,
And seide how sche wol bringe him inne,
That sche schal him to dethe winne
Al only of his oghne grant,
Thurgh strengthe of verray covenant
Withoute blame of eny wiht.
(1.1442-1451).

The grandmother explicitly wants to have her revenge on Florent. Described as old and sly, “she conspires with the grieving parents to design a ruse by which Florent can be legally killed for the death of Branchus without recrimination”.¹⁶ Here power is given to a woman not to address matters such as women’s authority, but to tackle another question: the ability to recognise the responsibility for a crime and to face the rightful consequences. Compared with the Wife’s knight, Florent behaves in the opposite way in front of this quest. The Wife’s knight does not complain about the quest, but he places his life above any other courtly values and does not think about anything else but himself. By contrast, Florent seems to recognise the importance to embark on this quest to redeem himself as

¹⁵ Roppolo, p. 267.

¹⁶ Mandel, Jerome, “Conflict Resolution in the Wife of Bath’s Tale and in Gower’s Tale of Florent”, in Laura Filardo-Llamas, Brian Gastle and Marta Gutiérrez Rodríguez, eds., *Gower in Context(s). Scribal, Linguistic, Literary and Socio-historical Readings (Special issue of ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa 33.1)*, Valladolid: Publicaciones Universidad de Valladolid (2012), p. 74.

a knight, rather than seeing it as the only way to survive. The grandmother does not assign him the task to prove his honour, but it is Florent's moral judgement that enables him to understand the quest as the occasion to redeem himself. For this reason, he recognises that accepting the quest is the fairest thing to do, because to obey the law means also to be true to himself. To show he will keep his pledge, he asks to write it down:

This knyht, which worthi was and wys,
This lady preith that he may wite,
And have it under seales write,
What questioun it scholde be
For which he schal in that degree
Stonde of his lif in jeupartie.
(1.1472-1477)

Florent's quest becomes a matter both of ethics and law. On the one hand, he recognises the importance of fair law, since crime does not come without consequences. Therefore, he accepts the conditions set by the woman, who is more concerned with the legality of the situation rather than with ethics.¹⁷ On the other hand, Florent's quest also involves his ethics and morale, because the task asks him to be true to himself, not only to the law. In this sense, the *Tale of Florent* is a tale of obedience, because it describes the importance of being true not only to law, but also to oneself despite the 'murmur and complaint' within one's personal judgement. Florent's quest, in contrast with the Wife's knight, is a task where "obedience and law mirror each other's validation",¹⁸ contributing to the moral redemption of the knight. The conflict between one's ethics and the importance of the law will further be discussed when dealing with Florent's promise of marriage to the loathly lady.

Despite the different attitudes vis-à-vis the quest, both knights begin their journey to search for the answer to the question 'what women most desire'. Both travel across lands and ask people to give them the right answer, but they cannot find even two people agreeing with each other. When possible solutions are described, we can notice some differences between the two tales. The Wife gives a long list of answers that the knight collects throughout his journey. The first element to

¹⁷ Peck, p. 111.

¹⁸ Peck, p. 110.

highlight is the Wife's change from a general form to refer to women ("somme seyde wommen loven best richesse", line 925) to the use of the first-person plural pronoun 'we' and its other forms 'our' and 'us' when talking about what people think women desire most. Expressions such as "a man shal winne us best with flaterye" (932), "and somme seyn how that we loven best for to be free and do right as us lest" (935-936), and "for be we never so vicious withinne, we wol been holden wyse, and clene of sinne" (943-944) represent the Wife's personal engagement to the Tale, because these are all answers that reflect her opinion on the matter. Moreover, this section does not specify whether the knight asks the question to men or women; instead, in the tale we find this comment: "but he ne coude arryven in no cost whereas he mighte finde in this matere two creatures accordinge in-fere" (922-924). The term "creatures" is a generic word that highlights how the knight collects opinions from everybody, regardless of their gender or social status. In this sense, not only the Wife gives voice to her thoughts on women's desires, but also she attributes these opinions to other possible women who do not agree with male assumptions on women and are able to speak their mind about the topic. In doing so, the Wife gives authority to those who should not be entitled to have it, such as women, but their experiences are enough for her to give them the right to talk about this subject and to express their opinions, as she does with her experience in marriage.

Another element that characterises the quest of the Wife's knight is the insertion of a digression: it is the Wife's interruption of the Tale, which once more underlines her personal involvement in the story. When the Wife talks about the several answers collected by the knight, she claims that women cannot keep secrets, in contrast with common assumptions:

And somme seyn that greet delyt han we
 For to ben holden stable and eek secree,
 And in o purpos stedefastly to dwelle,
 And nat biwreye thing that men us telle –
 But that tale is nat worth a rake-stele.
 Pardee, we wommen conne nothing hele.
 (945-950)

The following section (951-982) reports a story drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, but the Wife uses the story twisting its meaning and changing some elements from the original version, in order to prove

her point about how women cannot keep secrets. “Ovid’s text undergoes a metamorphosis of its own, as a story about a male servant’s betrayal is transformed into a tale about a wife’s inability to keep her husband’s secrets”.¹⁹ I propose two different points of view to read this digression. The first interpretation aligns the story with male assumptions regarding female gossip and knowledge: women who are left alone talking are dangerous because they undermine men’s reputation and authority. In fact, in the story, Mida’s wife cannot resist telling her husband’s secret about his ears and, in doing so, she threatens his position and makes him vulnerable. According to this interpretation, the Wife seems to agree with this common belief, and she uses an authoritative source to demonstrate it. However, clever readers know that the original version is very different from the one used by the Wife, and that it has nothing to do with women’s idle talk and gossip. By apparently agreeing with common stereotypes on women’s behaviours, in fact she supports her claims by using deception against men, making them believe they are right about the topic. It is not the first time the Wife uses deception to dominate men, and the previous analysis of her Prologue has shown how she is able to use authoritative sources such as the Bible or antifeminist literature to hold her position and claims. Here, deception works in a subtle way: she apparently gives authority to men, but she implicitly changes the meaning of the tale to claim female authority in marriage.

In the *Tale of Florent*, we do not find any personal comment because the story proposes an objective perspective on the topic in order to give Amans a proper teaching on Pride. Instead of asking common people, Florent asks his uncle for help, and his uncle summons “the wiseste of the lond” (1.1493). We can presume that these people are wise because of their education, and therefore they are able to provide Florent with a proper answer. Florent’s interaction with these wise men is in line with the aim of the story: if Genius wants to provide Amans with teachings, he must rely on authoritative sources that can give him models to follow. As in the case of Chaucer, he receives several different answers, but without any certainties regarding the right one. However, faced with this

¹⁹ Phillips, Susan E., *Transforming Talk. The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England*, University Park: Penn State Press, 2007, p. 111.

impossible quest, Florent's attitude is very different from the Wife's knight. In Chaucer, the knight heads back knowing all hope is lost and that he failed to save his life ("withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost", line 986). In Gower, Florent faces the situation knowing that if he dies, at least he will have been honest with himself and to the pledge he made, both from a legal and a personal point of view; "this knyth hath levere for to dye than breke his trowthe and for to lye" (1.1511-1512) and for this reason he asks his uncle not to do anything about it, otherwise Florent would not be true to himself: "and preith his em he be noght wroth, for that is a point of his oth" (1.1517-1518). As mentioned before, "word and contract are for him one"²⁰ because he wants to be true to chivalric values and to his honour; to do so, he must also be true to law.

The encounter with the loathly lady occurs when both knights seem to have given up on the quest. The main difference between the two tales concerns the attitude and character of the loathly lady. In the Wife's Tale, the knight meets the loathly lady after seeing "of ladies foure and twenty and yet mo" (992) dancing and then vanishing in front of his eyes. This scene, in line with the classical Arthurian setting, leaves space to an old and ugly woman, who asks the knight about his quest. From their interaction, a description of her character is provided. The loathly lady is presented as old and wise, in line with the motif, as well as with common assumptions on old women ("tel me what that ye seken, by youre fey! Paraventure it may the bettre be: thise olde folk can muchel thing' quod she", lines 1002-1004). For this reason, the knight trusts her and tells her about his quest. She agrees to help him only if the knight grants him what she wishes; in return, the knight promises to keep his pledge. The loathly lady's reaction is what creates a contrast from the classic description of the loathly lady:

"Thanne," quod she, "I dar me wel avante
Thy lyf is sauf, for I wol stonde therby.
Upon my lyf, the queen wol seye as I.
Lat see which is the proudeste of hem alle,
That wereth on a coverchief or a calle,
That dar seye nay of that I shal thee teche.
Lat us go forth withouten lenger speche".
(1014-1020)

²⁰ Peck, p. 111.

These lines outline the loathly lady's impertinence and boldness, since she claims her knowledge is enough to save the knight. Her attitude goes against the classical pattern of the loathly lady, who is generally portrayed as a helping figure. Instead, it seems the loathly lady wants to take revenge on those women who gave the quest to the knight by proving that her knowledge is enough to save lives. In this sense, we can say that she is a representation of the Wife's character, because she becomes "the perfect medium to express the tensions, fears, doubts, and aspirations in the Wife's divided personality".²¹ On the one hand, the Wife uses the loathly lady to demonstrate the authority of her experience and knowledge; on the other hand, the Wife exploits the common belief that old women are wise in order to deceive the knight and to force him into marrying her. The loathly lady does not say what she wants in exchange for her help, but her age and wisdom are enough for the knight to see her as his only hope for saving himself. But when they head back and the knight gives the answer to the Queen ("wommen desyren to have sovereyntee as wel over hir housbond as hir love, and for to been in maistrie him above", lines 1038-1040), the loathly lady readily explains everything about the promise the knight made her. In this moment, the loathly lady confesses to the knight that she wants him to marry her, and she requests the queen's court to exercise its power to ensure that her agreement with the knight is fulfilled.²² The knight reacts showing his disgust, and refuses to marry her because of her foulness; despite his attempts to make her change her mind, in the end he is constrained to marry her. The knight's reaction underlines two elements. The first is the fact that his attitude in front of the loathly lady's request shows "he has still not learnt his lesson".²³ His marriage to the old hag brings the knight in front of a second quest, that will ask him to reconsider his judgement towards the old hag. The second confirms the loathly lady as a reflection of the Wife's character, because as the Wife does, she is able to use deception and hold her authority by making the knight believe he has the control of the situation, but instead tricking him into marrying her.

²¹ Meyer, Robert J., "Chaucer's Tandem Romances: A Generic Approach to the "Wife of Bath's Tale" as Palinode", *The Chaucer Review*, 18 (1984), p. 229.

²² Mandel, p. 75.

²³ Slade, p. 245.

In Gower's version, we find a great difference in the presentation of the loathly lady and her first exchange with the knight. Gower's loathly lady does not have the scornful behaviour of Chaucer's old hag; she is not hostile towards Florent and "she knows when to speak and speaks wisdom when she does".²⁴ Instead, she is calm, detached, and willingly offers her help, as if she already knew about his quest:

And seide: "Florent be thi name,
Thou hast on honde such a game,
That bot thou be the betre avised,
Thi deth is schapen and devised,
That al the world ne mai thee save,
Bot if that thou my conseil have".
(1.1541-1546)

This loathly lady is a fair character because she puts Florent in front of a choice that requires his decision, not hers. In fact, she explicitly confesses that she will give him the answer only if he agrees with marrying her. Florent reacts differently from the Wife's knight. Instead of showing his despair, Florent is described reflecting upon the decision he has to take. He either marries the hag to be true to himself or loses his life if he does not: "and thoghte, as he rod to and fro, that chese he mot on of the tuo, or for to take hire to his wif or elles for to lese his lif" (1.1571-1574). Gower is not interested in the loathly lady as a character; instead, he focuses on Florent's interior dilemma and on "his thinking and devising ways around, but not vitiating, the principles that guide him".²⁵ The coexistence of law and ethics that Florent had to face in front of Branchus's family returns with the loathly lady's proposal: the old hag's offer is not as legally binding as the promise Florent made Branchus's grandmother, but it is strong enough to make Florent question his obedience to the loathly lady, because he promises her anything she wants if she helps him. Here Florent is in front of "a vow for which there were no seals, no public signing, or witnesses to enforce any breach of contract".²⁶ He recognises that accepting the woman's proposal will help him be true to himself and fulfil his quest, which not only involves the obedience to the pledge to the "olde mone" (1.1634), but also the

²⁴ Peck, p. 110.

²⁵ Mandel, p. 75.

²⁶ Peck, p. 112.

obedience to one's moral judgement. In the end, Florent decides to marry the old hag because it is the only way for him not to break the pledge he made to himself, which asks him to be faithful to chivalric values that define him as a knight and a man. Even though Florent could manage to save himself from death, he decides to follow his inner strength and to obey the law, from a legal and personal point of view. In this sense, for Florent "to be obedient (and hence humble, too) is all about the will, requiring a silencing of murmur and complaint of the divided inner man".²⁷ This insight in Florent's inner thoughts further highlights the difference with the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and her loathly lady. Gower is not interested in the old hag's ability to force Florent to marry her, and the text makes it very clear because the loathly lady is "self-controlled and discrete"²⁸ when she speaks to the knight and does not make any comments regarding the riddle. She only says she can help him provided he grants her their marriage in return. For this reason, the loathly lady becomes a means through which to reflect upon the inner murmur and complaint, in order to understand that obedience to one's values can turn into a great act of love. As for the Wife's knight, the marriage with the loathly lady will put Florent in front of a second quest, which will ask him to deal with a moral conflict within himself.

3.4. The marriage dilemma and the transformation of the loathly lady

This section examines the remaining parts of the two 'loathly lady' tales: it focuses on the marriage dilemma, which is the second 'quest' the knight has to face, and the final transformation of the loathly lady, which helps to draw some conclusions concerning the meaning of her character in the respective narratives. Both Chaucer and Gower present these two elements in the same circumstance: the knight and the loathly lady's wedding night. After marrying the old hag with a private ceremony, the knight confronts her during their first night of marriage and decides for his fate by answering the old hag's dilemma. Their interaction is very different from one tale to another, and

²⁷ Yeager, p. 54.

²⁸ Peck, p. 110.

this difference leads to two different transformations of the loathly lady, as well as to different meanings of the two stories.

In Chaucer, the knight is depicted as a suffering man: he is in agony because of his condition, and he feels ashamed about his marriage with the old woman (“and al day after hidde him as an oule, so wo was him, his wyf looked so foule”, lines 1081-1082). He expresses without shame his regret in front of the loathly lady, and his attitude highlights how he cannot bear his condition; his selfishness blinds him to the fact that his marriage with the old hag is the rightful consequence of his actions:

Thou art so loothly, and so old also,
And therto comen of so lowe a kinde,
That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and winde.
So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!
(1100-1103)

By contrast, the loathly lady shows her happiness for her marriage, and apparently she cannot understand the knight’s anger and discomfort. She pretends she cannot find any reason why the knight should be enraged with her, because she thinks that the knight should be thankful for everything she did for him, above all for saving his life:

And seyde, “O dere housbond, *benedicite!*
Fareth every knight thus with his wyf as ye?
Is this the lawe of King Arthures hous?
Is every knight of his so dangerous?
I am youre owene love and eek youre wyf;
I am she which that saved hath youre lyf;
And certes yet dide I yow nevere unright.
Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?”
(1087-1094)

This first exchange between the loathly lady and the knight has two meanings. The first is related to the consequences of the knight’s actions. After raping the maid, he does not seem concerned about the effects of his behaviour, and he departs for the quest only to save his life, regardless of the need to change his morality. When he realises the old hag has tricked him into marrying her, the knight does not want to accept his destiny; he has not learned anything from his previous actions, and therefore he cannot understand why he is constrained into something he does not want to do. As mentioned before, the knight does not realise that marrying the old hag is the right consequence for his behaviour. For this reason, the loathly lady tries to make him aware that it is his fault he is married

to an old, ugly woman, not hers. She reminds him that she did not do anything wrong and that he has received what he deserves: he raped a woman and the marriage with the loathly lady has put him in front of the wrongness of his behaviour. The second meaning is connected to the parody of romance: in these lines, the contrast between the agony of the knight and the happiness of the old hag is a highly comic scene, because it reflects Chaucer's critique to the dynamics of romance. In fact, the knight's attitude is not in line with chivalry and courtly manners, which are elements the audience expects the knight to possess. Instead, the knight's complaints underline the lack of these values. Moreover, Chaucer makes a parody of the courtly knight, presenting him as a model that does not work anymore because it conceals man's corrupted nature behind images such as chivalry, humbleness, and generosity, which are attributes the audience generally associates with knights in romance.

After the exchange between the knight and the loathly lady, the tale registers a change of tone in the woman's attitude. In fact, the humour of the interaction in their bedroom leaves space to a more serious tone, which characterises the content of the following section: the sermon of the loathly lady (1106-1227). This long lecture on the concept of "gentillesse" (1109) represents the Wife's personal intervention within her tale, as it reflects the Wife's opinion on the relationship between men and women in marriage, as well as on the concept of sovereignty. Indeed, the change of tone indicates a passage from the fairy-tale setting of the story to more serious, real-life issues. Her lecture stresses "the inadequacy of earthly hopes and the weakness of earthly power"²⁹ by subverting the meaning of 'gentillesse' in order to give the loathly lady sovereignty on the knight. The sermon is in the form of a monologue, where the loathly lady gains an active role, while the knight remains silent, without interrupting. In front of the knight's discomfort, the loathly lady starts her sermon by highlighting how he is not worthy of his title because he does not possess the 'gentillesse' expected from his role:

But for ye speken of swich gentillesse
As is descended out of old richesse –
That therfore sholden ye be gentil men –
Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.
Loke who that is most vertuouse alway,

²⁹ Leicester, H. Marshall, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self. Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 150.

Privee and apert, and most entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he can,
And tak him for the grettest gentil man.
(1109-1116)

According to common assumptions on the concept, she points out how noble men in possession of a title and material wealth, should all possess 'gentillesse', which means 'nobility of the soul', because of their position in society. However, the loathly lady states how these beliefs have led to misinterpret the concept itself. First, she supports her claim by saying that, regardless of his status, the knight is not worthy of possessing this virtue. She highlights how nobility and honour are detached from any material possessions or noble titles because they are values concerning human nature ("heer may ye see wel how that gentrye is nat annexed to possessioun, sith folk ne doon hir operacioun alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kinde", lines 1146-1149). She also states that there are people who committed crimes and atrocities who are praised for possessing nobility only because of their position in society:

Men may wel often finde
A lordes sone do shame and vileinye;
And he that wol han prys of his gentrye
For he was boren of a gentil hous,
And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous,
And nil himselven do no gentil dedis.
(1150-1155)

What the old hag claims is that true nobility is not a virtue coming from birth or a high rank in society but is an attribute belonging to "any person who lives properly".³⁰ The knight is the proof that his title does not make him noble or virtuous since its title does not stop him from committing rape nor from focusing only on his own desires. To support her position, the loathly lady uses Christian religion as her source, highlighting how everything she says belongs to Christian values and comes from Christ's teachings ("Crist wol we clayme of himoure gentillesse, nat ofoure eldres for hire old richesse", lines 1117-1118). The loathly lady does not consider nobility as a virtue depending only on social class; instead, she expands its meaning, highlighting how true nobility is an attribute belonging to every human being, regardless of social ranks. In this sense, the old hag wants the knight to understand that "true gentillesse (...) resides only in personal qualities and Christian virtues. And these must be

³⁰ Roppolo, p. 267.

a man's own, not enshrined with the memory of ancestors who led good lives"³¹ (Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone. Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace: it was nothing biquethe us with oure place", lines 1162-1164).

The use of sources like the Bible further confirms the loathly lady as a reflection of the Wife's personality and character. As the Wife does in her Prologue, the loathly lady employs authoritative sources to support her assertions on the topic of 'gentillesse'. In this way, the old hag highlights how her sermon is not merely her opinion; instead, it appears to present an authoritative and acknowledged truth which the knight cannot deny, as it comes from the highest authority of the time. In this passage, the loathly lady acts in the same way as the Wife because she works by deception. Apparently, she does not express personal opinions or comments on the topic, and she leaves the authority to her source, not claiming any for herself. Indeed, the loathly lady's statements appear to the knight as objective truths that enable him to act according to Christ's teachings, which apparently have nothing to do with the loathly lady's desire for authority. However, what the loathly lady does is to use a strategy of deception to have authority and control over the knight. By using Christian values as her source, she makes the knight believe he is in control of the situation, and that her sermon only describes something he already knows. In fact, the loathly lady is using the Bible to exercise power and authority over the knight in order to make him understand how he does not possess any 'gentillesse'. In doing so, the loathly lady can claim authority for herself, and she succeeds in undermining the knight's position.

Apart from nobility, the loathly lady also stresses another aspect, which is poverty. In the sermon, poverty is intended as the lack of material goods, but the loathly lady subverts its meaning:

He that coveyteth is a povre wight,
For he wolde han that is nat in his might.
But he that noght hath, ne coveyteth have,
Is riche, although ye holde him but a knave.
(1187-1190)

³¹ Colmer, p. 335.

Her assertions highlight poverty as a virtue, which does not concern only material possessions, as common beliefs claim. As she does with ‘gentillesse’, she changes the meaning of the concept: poverty means ‘poverty of the soul’, related to the ability to detach oneself from earthly goods in order to connect with those values that matter most in life. In the case of the knight, the loathly lady implicitly claims that he can never be happy if he continues to search for richness to try to hold to his social status; therefore, his wealth is not enough to make him a noble and virtuous knight. The loathly lady supports her beliefs by stressing Christ’s condition of poverty, highlighting how he voluntarily chose a humble lifestyle to lead a life according to God’s values:

The hye God, on whom that we bileve,
In wilful povert chees to live his lyf.
And certes every man, mayden, or wyf,
May understonde that Jesus, hevene king,
Ne wolde nat chese a vicious living.
Glad povert is an honest thing, certeyn.
(1178-1183)

The loathly lady’s sermon opens the discussion on the topic of sovereignty, as it makes the audience question who holds power and control in this relationship. This situation reminds us of the Wife’s five marriages, when the Wife uses different means of deception according to her different husbands, and sometimes it is difficult to establish who holds authority in marriage. In the same way, ambiguities concerning who has sovereignty between the loathly lady and the knight are found in the tale. As the Wife does, the loathly lady uses strategies of deception to persuade the knight. They are all strategies that do not clearly express the domination of the loathly lady over her husband, but they conceal it behind other concepts. As mentioned before, the loathly lady employs Christian religion and the Scriptures to support her claims and to establish her position in the relationship as authoritative, just as the Wife does with her first three husbands. At the same time, she shows the knight he lacks several important values, not granted with his title. In this way, the old hag has instructed the knight “in the worthlessness of a claim to superiority based on the mere accident of birth”³² by employing an

³² Colmer, p. 335.

authoritative source of knowledge. Accusing the knight of the lack of some qualities, such as nobility and poverty, enables the loathly lady to start claiming sovereignty for herself.

Another more subtle strategy of deception works in a similar way as in the Wife's fifth marriage. During her sermon, the loathly lady "is not so much attempting to claim gentillesse for herself as to deny it to her husband,"³³ meaning that she never explicitly reproaches the knight for his behaviour. Indeed, apart from asking him what she did wrong at the beginning of her monologue, everything the loathly lady says is expressed in general terms, and she never addresses the knight directly. Moreover, she seems to include herself in the discourse: she says she hopes to obtain the same 'gentillesse' she describes in her monologue. In doing so, she makes the knight believe she has to learn as much as he does:

Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
Grante me grace to liven vertuously.
Thanne am I gentil, whan that I biginne
To liven vertuously and weyve sinne.
(1172-1176)

Her behaviour is part of her strategy of deception: "the Wife of Bath uses the mask of the hag as an image of her own diminished powers (...) to try out this rhetoric"³⁴ with the knight. She wants the knight to feel pity for her by making him believe that learning about 'gentillesse' is all she has left because she is ugly and old, but what she actually does is to make the knight grant her sovereignty on his decisions and in marriage.

These subtle methods of deception find their realisation with the final dilemma the loathly lady proposes to the knight. She makes him decide whether he wants her ugly and loyal, or beautiful and eager to abandon him for other lovers (lines 1219-1226). In contrast with the *Tale of Florent*, this choice is a "dilemma involving pleasure and virtue,"³⁵ and it asks the knight an effort to recognise the importance of honour above pleasures. At this point of the tale, his reaction suggests that he has

³³ Colmer, p. 335.

³⁴ Leicester, p. 150.

³⁵ Cary, Meredith, "Sovereignty and Old Wife", *Papers on Language and Literature*, 5 (1969), p. 384.

learned something from the loathly lady's sermon. This means that her deception made the knight understand the right choice, but at the same time it makes him believe that his change of attitude has been entirely his merit, when in reality he has been persuaded towards this change. In front of the dilemma, the knight finally surrenders:

My lady and my love, and wyf so dere,
I put me in youre wyse governance:
Cheseth youreself which may be most plesance
And most honour to yow and me also.
(1230-1233)

The knight's decision is the moment when the loathly lady obtains sovereignty over him: the only way for the loathly lady to achieve sovereignty over the knight is through his willing submission.³⁶ The knight decides to trust the old hag and he surrenders to her authority only after being persuaded by her sermon. That is because the loathly lady's sermon succeeds in making the knight believe he is in charge of his destiny because he apparently chooses what he desires. In reality, "he is (...) allowing the *wyf* to define for him what his desires are".³⁷

The knight's final submission introduces the transformation of the loathly lady. After obtaining sovereignty from the knight, the loathly lady transforms into a beautiful woman, fulfilling the man's desires:

"Kis me", quod she. "We be no lenger wrothe,
For by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe,
This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good (...)
Doth with my lyf and deeth right as yow lest."
(1239-1241, 1248)

After her words, the knight finds himself in front of a fair young lady ("that she so fair was and so yong therto", line 1251). Her transformation does not have any magical reasons, nor is it the consequence of a previous enchantment. The absence of magic highlights the Wife's intention, as well as Chaucer's, to address a real matter, that is female sovereignty in marriage. Indeed, in the end the loathly lady obtains sovereignty over the knight, just as the Wife does with her five husbands. On

³⁶ Cary, p. 385.

³⁷ Thomas, Susanne Sara, "The Problem of Defining "Sovereynetee" in the Wife of Bath's Tale", *The Chaucer Review*, 41 (2006), p. 93.

the one hand, the Wife makes men believe they have control over women, as the loathly lady does with the knight by making him believe the choice is entirely up to him. On the other hand, her deception allows her to have control over her husbands, and in the same way the loathly lady obtains sovereignty directly from the knight, who allows her to decide for him.

However, we cannot be entirely sure about the loathly lady's full sovereignty over the knight because we must remember that Chaucer may be also making fun of the Wife, and therefore of the loathly lady. In fact, at the end of the story, we read: "and she obeyed him in every thing that mighte doon him plesance or lyking" (1255-1256). It seems that the loathly lady, as the knight does, renounces some of her sovereignty in order not to lose the one she has gained from the knight. Throughout her sermon, she "dominates the conversation until he voluntarily declares her to be both dear and wise. But from that point on, she obeys him in everything".³⁸ In this sense, the loathly lady and the knight may have achieved mutual happiness "through a negotiation where each gave up something",³⁹ and the loathly lady may not be the only character having sovereignty over the other. According to this interpretation, the tale seems to suggest that men who give up authority have an obedient and faithful wife in exchange: this interpretation seems to confirm male domination within marriage. Nevertheless, the last part of the tale confirms the loathly lady's possession of sovereignty and authority:

And Jesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meke, yonge, and fresshe abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde.
And eek I preye Jesu shorte hir lyves
That noight wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nigardes of dispence,
God sende hem sone verray pestilence!
(1258-1264)

This mock prayer outlines how in the end, it is the loathly lady who has power over the knight: by making him believe he can have control over her as soon as she transforms into a beautiful maiden, she actually deceives him, holding power and authority in the relationship. Therefore, the loathly lady

³⁸ Cary, p. 387.

³⁹ Mandel, p. 76.

represents women's ability to gain sovereignty in marriage by using deception over their husbands. Women control the fate of their husbands by making them believe they are in charge. This interpretation is in line with the first riddle, which states that women desire control in marriage and over their lovers, in order to be able to choose for themselves.

As concerns Gower, the exchange between Florent and the loathly lady is very different from Chaucer's; the focus is on Florent's internal conflict and thoughts right after agreeing to marry the loathly lady and during their first wedding night. After Florent has given the correct answer to Branchus's family, he returns to the loathly lady as he agreed to do, in order to keep his promise both to the dead knight's relatives and to himself. We can notice how Florent's attitude is quite different from the Wife's knight. On his way back, he fully realises he is constrained to marry the hag, and despite his inner refusal, his honour and sense of duty bring him to accept his destiny. This part more than others highlights the lack of real interaction between the two characters throughout the story: if in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* the knight and the loathly lady are involved in a lively exchange, in the *Tale of Florent*, "speeches are really monologues because there is no direct reaction from the 'opponent'".⁴⁰ Indeed, the latter part of the tale focusing on Florent's inner conflict is an insight in his thoughts, and no interaction with the old hag takes place. Before the final transformation of the loathly lady, we find several passages describing Florent's inner quarrel, characterised by the coexistence of the concepts of law and ethics. As mentioned before, with Florent and the loathly lady's marriage, law does not have a political meaning, but it involves the pledge Florent makes to the old hag, which binds him to its respect as much as law does. His inner conflict is the focus on this latter part of the story, and it is described right after he gives the right answer to the question 'what women most desire':

Florent of his answer is quit,
And tho began his sorwe newe,
For he mot gon, or ben untrew,
To hire which is trowthe hadde.
Bot he, which alle schame dradde,

⁴⁰ Fischer, Olga C.M., "Gower's Tale of Florent and Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale: A Stylistic Comparison", *English Studies*, 3 (1985), p. 210.

Goth forth in stede of his penance,
And takth the fortune of his chance,
As he that was with trowthe affaited.
(1.1664-1671)

Gower uses an interesting metaphor to highlight Florent's emotional status: he compares the knight to a sick person that has to take several medicines to feel better. Sometimes, when medicines do not taste good, one who is sick takes them with something sweet to conceal the bad taste. In the same way, despite being sad and frustrated about his fate, Florent must be true to his pledge, or he would be untrue to his honour and morality:

Loke, how a sek man for his hele
Takth baldemoine with canele,
And with the mirre takth the sucre, (...)
Stant Florent, as in this diete:
He drinkth the bitre with the swete,
He medleth sorwe with likynge.
(1.1703-1705, 1.1707-1709)

For Florent, to mix "the bitre with the swete" (1.1708) not only means acting according to his pledge, and therefore being coherent to what he promised, but also it means listening to what his ethics says it is right, despite being something that hurts or that he does not want to do. Florent's attitude is extensively described when he returns home with the loathly lady: instead of asking his privy council for help, he informs them of his intentions⁴¹ because he recognises that marrying the old woman is the right thing to do to keep his promise and be truthful to his position as a knight:

Wher he his privé conseil nam
Of suche men as he most troste,
And tolde hem that he nedes moste
This beste wedde to his wif,
For elles hadde he lost his lif.
(1.1738-1742)

The following passages describing their first wedding night once more underline the conflict within Florent's morality. On the one hand, the old hag explicitly shows her bliss for the marriage: she "tok thanne chiere on honde" (1.1767) and she says to Florent sweet words ("my lord, go we to bedde, for I to that entente wedde, that thou schalt be my worldes blisse", verses 1.1769-1771). On the other hand, Florent's attitude is in contrast with the loathly lady's, as in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. However,

⁴¹ Mandel, p. 76.

Florent's torment is not merely a complaint, as the Wife's knight's is; instead, it is an inner quarrel between his morality and his pledge:

His body myhte wel be there,
Bot as of thoght and of memoire
His herte was in purgatoire.
Bot yit for strenghte of matrimoine
He mythe make non essoine,
That he ne mot algates plie
To gon to bedde of compaignie.
(1.1774-1780)

Florent "torneth on that other side, for that he wolde hise yhen hyde fro lokynge on that fole wyht" (1.1783-1785), but nevertheless he is aware of the importance of his promise for his honour. All these passages present Florent as conscious of his inner conflict: from the beginning of the tale, he has not tried to escape his fate, and he has accepted it because his honour tells him he has to make up for the wrong he has committed. He is aware of the coexistence of two principles that are guiding his thoughts and reflections: on the one hand, the importance of the law, in this case, of the pledge he has made to the loathly lady; on the other hand, the importance of following ethics to act according to noble values. Rather than a conflict between ethics and law, Florent understands the importance of the coexistence of these two principles, meaning that law and ethics can be both guiding principles in life without excluding each other. In this sense, he is the example of obedience against Pride that Genius wants to transmit to the audience reading the *Confessio Amantis*.

Even though he is used as an *exemplum*, I believe Florent is not a perfect man because there are moments where he seems to give up on his honourable promise. Indeed, we find Florent regretting losing his youth as a consequence of the marriage ("his youthe schal be cast aweie", verse 1.1711), he sighs because of the old hag's loathsome appearance ("no wonder thogh he siketh ofte", verse 1.1726), and he is so ashamed of the loathly lady that he travels during the night so that nobody can see them ("bot as an oule fleth by nyhte out of alle othre briddes syhte", verses 1.1727-1728). I believe it is Gower's intention to present a model that is not perfect in behaviour and thoughts, because through his poem he wants to teach how to improve one's behaviour through actions and words. To do so, he intentionally employs imperfect models to show that acting according to love and doing

what is right is possible for everyone, and not only for a restricted group of people. In fact, Florent slowly learns that he must act according both to law and to his ethics, not choosing which one is more important, but rather considering both values to act according to love, justice and good virtues. Therefore, Florent becomes the model of the frailty of human nature that can redeem itself only if guided by honourable principles, and it gives human beings the ability to recognise the rightful choices despite the affliction such choices might cause.

Florent's inner dilemma can be interpreted from a political perspective, and this insight makes the knight a model not only for human beings in general, but also for the authorities and institutions of the time. As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, the aim of the *Confessio Amantis* is also political, and in each story, Gower asks his audience to find the connection between the tale and reality. Looking at the *Tale of Florent* from this perspective, Florent becomes a model for the most influential authorities of Gower's time: the Monarchy and the Church. Both institutions are living within a conflict between law and ethics. On the one hand, the law is employed to reflect the Monarchy's and the Church's interests and aims, and because of their influential position, these institutions make their population's interests align with theirs. The law has become a tool through which institutions exercise their power and authority regardless of any ethical principle. On the other hand, they seem to have lost the ability to act according to ethics: as long as the law they establish grants them what they want in terms of wealth and power, ethics does not seem to be a value to pursue because it does not give them any profit. In this sense, the *Tale of Florent* is also a political *exemplum*, because it shows how law and ethics are not independent from each other. Instead, it is the coexistence of these two principles that enables human beings to act according to what is right, both in legal and in ethical terms. The tale becomes an example of obedience because it asks authorities of the time not to listen to the 'murmur and complaint' of their corrupted nature that distances them from honest Christian values. Therefore, the Monarchy and the Church should not be blinded by their Pride, which leads them to focus only on gathering power and wealth; they need to find the right balance between using the law to guarantee control and justice, and ensuring the rightfulness of such law through

ethics. In this sense, “the political applicability of “The Tale of Florent” extends to all whose Pride has led to Murmur and Complaint, and outright Inobedience to established sovereign rule”,⁴² and also to the authorities governing England at the end of the fourteenth century to enhance their change of perspective in order to act according to moral values.

Florent’s inner quarrel is connected to the question of sovereignty in the tale: in the end, as the Wife’s knight does, Florent has to take a decision concerning his marriage to the loathly lady, but the circumstances are different from the other tale. During their first wedding night, Florent still struggles with his thoughts and with the idea of being married to an old hag, despite knowing he has made the right choice. At one point, the loathly lady embraces Florent, recalling the indissolubility of their bond (“we ben bothe on”, verse 1.1793). Suddenly, something unexpected happens which does not occur in the Wife’s Tale. Up to that moment, Florent did not have the courage to look at her, because he felt ashamed about her external appearance (“in armes sche beclipte hire lord, and preide, as he was torned fro, he wolde him torne ageinward tho”, verses 1.1790-1792). When Florent finally surrenders and turns to the old hag, he finds a beautiful young woman lying beside him:

And, as it were a man in trance,
He torneth him al sodeinly,
And syh a lady lay him by
Of eyhtetiene wynter age,
Which was the faireste of visage
That evere in al this world he syh.
(1.1800-1805)

The beautiful maiden puts Florent in front of the second dilemma: she says “he mot on of tuo thinges chese, wher he wol have hire such on nyht, or elles upon daies lyht, for he schal noght have bothe tuo” (verses 1.1810-1813).

We can notice some differences between Chaucer’s and Gower’s loathly lady in this scene. The first difference is the fact that Chaucer’s old hag remains loathly when proposing the dilemma to the knight. This choice is in line with the Wife’s intention to tackle the topic of middle-aged women

⁴² Yeager, p. 59.

and their opportunities for authority in marriage. Instead, with Gower the loathly lady gives a glimpse of her transformation even before giving him the riddle. The second difference is related to the dilemma itself. Both loathly ladies give the knight the occasion to choose his destiny by giving him options. However, Chaucer emphasises aspects such as women's loyalty and beauty -- the loathly lady asks the knight to choose between having her beautiful but unfaithful, or ugly but loyal -- because the Wife's intention is to talk about women's sovereignty in marriage. By contrast, Gower only mentions external appearance: the loathly lady can be beautiful either during the day or during the night. That is because Gower is not interested in discussing the topic of female sovereignty in marriage: in this sense, the loathly lady is only a metaphor to tackle other matters concerning moral change to avoid corruption.

Faced with this decision, Florent decides to trust the woman and leaves his destiny in her hands: "Florent's division, what he calls his "querele" within himself, has so sapped his power to think or act that at last he surrenders both to the once-loathly lady".⁴³ In contrast with the Wife's knight, in the *Tale of Florent* we do not find any sermon that persuades the knight to give up his sovereignty to give it to the loathly lady. In Gower, the loathly lady is only a metaphor of sovereignty, and she does not represent women's desire for authority. Instead, she asks people to give up some of their powers and desires to understand the importance of obedience and to act according to moral values and reason. Florent is able to recognise by himself that the decision is up to the loathly lady because it is the only way for him to be true to his pledge and his values as a knight:

O ye, my lyves hele,
Sey what you list in my querele,
I not what ansuere I schal give:
Bot evere whil that I may live,
I wol that ye be my maistresse,
For I can nought miselve gesse
Which is the beste unto my chois.
Thus grante I yow myn hole vois:
Ches for ous bothen, I you preie;
And what as evere that ye seie,
Riht as ye wole so wol I.
(l.1821-1831)

⁴³ Yeager, p. 55.

In the end, the loathly lady decides upon Florent's destiny and remains a beautiful young lady: "mi beauté, which that I now have, til I be take into my grave; bot nyht and day as I am now I schal alwey be such to yow" (1.1837-1840). The transformation of the hag is entirely gratuitous; it represents the implicit reward for the honest knight who lives by moral principles and keeps his word.⁴⁴ We can notice another difference in the loathly lady's transformation, which gives the character a different meaning from Chaucer's loathly lady. If in the Wife's tale, the old hag's transformation is not given any reasons, in Gower's version the transformation breaks the enchantment of which the woman has been victim. She reveals that his stepmother bewitched her and that the spell could have been broken only if she had been able to receive love from a knight:

The kinges dowhter of Cizile
 I am, and fell bot siththe awhile,
 As I was with my fader late,
 That my stepmoder for an hate,
 Which toward me sche hath begonne,
 Forschop me, til I hadde wonne
 The love and soverineté
 Of what knyht that in his degré
 Alle othre passeth of good name.
 (1.1841-1849)

The use of the motif of the evil woman, usually presented as the stepmother, who acts out of jealousy and puts a curse on a young woman, is a popular pattern found in many folktales.⁴⁵ In these circumstances, the curse is generally broken by a valiant and virtuous knight, "one who can, perhaps with the victim's guidance, solve the riddle and otherwise meet the demands specified by the enchantress".⁴⁶ Florent is an example of this model because he lets his ethics and morality guide his actions, and consequently he is able to free the woman from the spell because he recognises the right thing to do.

I propose an interpretation of this transformation which connects the meaning of the loathly lady to the general aim of the tale, and of the *Confessio Amantis* as a whole. The enchantment of the loathly lady is the cause of the hideousness of her external appearance; however, Gower does not

⁴⁴ Mandel, p. 77.

⁴⁵ Peck, p. 113.

⁴⁶ Peck, p. 113.

insert this element only to refer to a folkloric tradition, but expands its meaning aligning with the *exemplum*. The reason given for the enchantment of the loathly lady is a metaphor of the causes of Pride. Pride does not exist without reasons, meaning there is always an element that causes us to be proud; consequently, Pride makes people forget which values are worth pursuing and which ones corrupt their nature and morality. The transformation of the old hag can be read as a metaphor that highlights how it is essential to find and change those causes that lead people to vicious behaviours, in order to act according to justice, honour and love.

In the story, the loathly lady's transformation represents Florent's moral change: for the knight, it has been difficult not to follow his own desires, but throughout the tale he has learned to recognise the causes of his sinful behaviour. Indeed, Florent's strength has led him to surrender to the loathly lady because his inner quarrel made him realise that it is possible to act according to virtuous values only if he recognises the need to fight the vice that dominates him. For these reasons, the final transformation connects to the aim of the *Confessio Amantis*: it means changing our perspective after recognising those sinful attitudes that dominate us and make us act against love and ethics. Only if people recognise the need for a change, they will be able to pursue love in every action they perform. This interpretation of the loathly lady's transformation addresses every human being, even those people holding important positions in society. Indeed, the moral change has also a political meaning because institutions and authorities are not excused from recognising the fault in their actions and trying to change their corrupted behaviour, in order to pursue both ethical and rightful decisions.

The analysis of the two 'loathly lady' tales has shown that, even though Chaucer and Gower use similar elements to construct the stories, they give such elements different meanings, according to the aim they give to the two tales. In particular, differences in the portrayal of the loathly lady have shown different approaches to the motif, which brought the two authors to give a different aim to the old hag in the narratives. Considering the ambiguities surrounding the Wife of Bath, Chaucer's loathly lady can be seen either as a parody of her insubordinate teller or a reinforcement of the Wife's beliefs on female sovereignty in marriage. Either way, the loathly lady becomes the real protagonist of the

story, and she is employed to explore new opportunities for women to obtain authority in marriage, as the last lines of the tale show (1258-1264). In this way, she becomes the means through which to present new models for women in the medieval society. Gower employs the loathly lady as a metaphor to instruct human beings on the need to change in order not to be blinded by vice. The last verses of the tale are useful to draw some conclusions on the meaning of the loathly lady in the story: they confirm Gower's intention both to address human nature and the political class ruling England at the time:

For ye have told me such a skile
Of this ensample now tofore,
That I schal evermo therfore
Hierafterward myn observance
To love and to his obeissance
The betre kepe: and over this
Of pride if ther oght elles is,
Wherof that I me schryve schal.
(1.1866-1873)

Amans's final promise to act according to love and obedience reflects Gower's warning to the institutions: they need to pursue a change in their morality, otherwise their corrupted nature will lead them to their ruin. In this sense, the loathly lady serves only as a means through which to tackle these topics to demonstrate "that strength of arm is not enough, neither to create a "hol" man, nor (...) a peaceful and unified England".⁴⁷ Moreover, her sovereignty over the knight is not connected to women's desire for authority, but it rather represents obedience against pride that every human being, authorities above all, should be able to pursue to ensure rightful actions and behaviours.

⁴⁷ Yeager, p. 58.

Riassunto

La figura della *loathly lady* è un motivo narrativo che fa parte di una lunga tradizione all'interno della cultura e letteratura europea e, come tutti i motivi fiabeschi, è stata oggetto di molti cambiamenti e trasformazioni. Il motivo si presenta come segue: generalmente, un cavaliere incontra una donna vecchia e ripugnante, la quale gli offre consiglio per le prove che deve affrontare. In cambio, lei chiede al cavaliere di sposarla e di offrirle il suo amore per essere liberata dal suo aspetto orrendo. È proprio il matrimonio tra il cavaliere e la donna che consente a quest'ultima di trasformarsi in una bellissima e giovane fanciulla, riacquistando così la sua bellezza perduta. La cornice generale della storia della *loathly lady* comprende alcuni elementi, come l'incontro tra il cavaliere e la donna nel bosco, il matrimonio forzato e la trasformazione finale della vecchia, che aiutano a riconoscere il motivo fiabesco. Tuttavia, il modello della *loathly lady* è stato facilmente oggetto di modifiche e cambi di significato. L'analisi di due storie che utilizzano questo motivo, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* di Geoffrey Chaucer, e the *Tale of Florent* di John Gower, ha come obiettivo quello di considerare i diversi cambiamenti che i due autori attuano in due storie diverse partendo dallo stesso modello.

Il motivo della *loathly lady* è generalmente inserito in storie che appartengono al genere del romanzo cavalleresco. Infatti, ci sono alcuni elementi facilmente riconoscibili dai lettori che sono caratterizzanti di questo genere. I seguenti aspetti sono presenti anche nei racconti di Chaucer e di Gower: una missione intrapresa dal cavaliere, la soluzione ad un indovinello, il matrimonio con la donna e la trasformazione di quest'ultima. Essendo un genere molto popolare nella società medievale, crea delle aspettative nei lettori riguardo allo sviluppo e allo scopo della storia. Partendo da questi presupposti, sia Chaucer che Gower usano il genere del romanzo cavalleresco e il motivo della *loathly lady* per diversi scopi, tra cui mettere in discussione le dinamiche e i personaggi del genere letterario, e trasmettere degli insegnamenti attraverso le rispettive storie. Inoltre, il romanzo cavalleresco viene usato per parlare della società medievale di fine quattordicesimo secolo e delle varie problematiche storiche, culturali e sociali dell'epoca. In particolare, si dà attenzione al ruolo della donna di mezza

età che, come la donna di Bath, si trova a vivere un'età in cui non è considerata né giovane né vecchia. L'analisi tra *The Wife of Bath's Tale* e *The Tale of Florent* pone in discussione questa visione della donna, e i diversi significati attribuiti alla *loathly lady* permettono di capire quale autore invochi un nuovo modello femminile per l'epoca, e quale invece utilizzi il motivo per altri scopi.

Per avere più familiarità con gli elementi narrativi presenti all'interno dei due racconti, ho proposto un'analisi degli elementi ricorrenti della storia della *loathly lady* utilizzando la classificazione delle funzioni e dei personaggi di Vladimir Propp. L'obiettivo di questa analisi è dimostrare, come sostiene Propp, che la presenza di elementi ricorrenti contribuisce a dare al racconto uniformità e regolarità, nonostante il significato di questi elementi cambi di storia in storia e crei ogni volta trame diverse. L'analisi mostra come le due storie abbiano molti elementi in comune, ad ognuno dei quali viene assegnata una funzione; tuttavia, si dimostra che ogni storia sviluppa i vari elementi in maniera diversa, dando ai rispettivi racconti significati diversi.

Il motivo della *loathly lady* non è utilizzato esclusivamente dai due autori in considerazione, ma appartiene ad una lunga tradizione letteraria e culturale che ha contribuito alla diffusione del motivo nel corso dei secoli. Per questa ragione, ho esplorato alcune versioni antecedenti del motivo, provenienti dalla tradizione folklorica irlandese, per riflettere sull'influenza che queste prime versioni hanno avuto sulle successive, tra cui quelle in oggetto di questa tesi. I tre racconti selezionati usano il motivo della *loathly lady* con un forte scopo politico; essi, infatti, avevano l'obiettivo di istruire possibili candidati al trono d'Irlanda sulle virtù e i valori che un sovrano doveva possedere. Il protagonista di queste tre storie, Níall, viene messo alla prova dalla *loathly lady*: lei è il personaggio che conferma a Níall il possesso di tutti gli attributi necessari per diventare re, ed è in grado di dargli i giusti consigli ed insegnamenti, in modo che lui possa seguirli e orientare le sue azioni verso un comportamento nobile e virtuoso. L'analisi del significato della *loathly lady* in queste versioni antecedenti sottolinea alcune differenze con *The Wife of Bath's Tale* e *The Tale of Florent*. Da un lato, nelle versioni irlandesi il cavaliere è già in possesso delle virtù richieste per ricoprire il ruolo di re, e la *loathly lady* rappresenta il personaggio attraverso cui il cavaliere orienta il suo comportamento e

la sua morale. Dall'altro lato, nei due racconti inglesi, il cavaliere non possiede qualità come l'umiltà e la generosità, e la *loathly lady* è il personaggio attraverso il quale il cavaliere attua un cambio morale nel suo atteggiamento.

Un ultimo elemento da tenere in considerazione per l'analisi della *loathly lady* è il contesto storico, sociale e culturale della società medievale del quattordicesimo secolo. In particolare, mi sono soffermata sul concetto di donna di mezza età, per esplorare alcuni temi come la concezione di anzianità nelle donne, i ruoli che ricoprivano in società, l'autorità nel matrimonio e le loro potenzialità. È molto difficile stabilire un'età esatta alla quale le donne fossero considerate vecchie: per la società medievale, la donna tra i trenta e i cinquant'anni stava vivendo in un periodo che la privava di qualsiasi potenzialità e attributo. Agli stereotipi riguardanti l'età, si aggiungono anche alcune convinzioni su ruoli come madre, moglie, e vedova: sono ruoli caratterizzati da molte aspettative che nei due racconti si cercano di smentire. In particolare, le supposizioni riguardanti il ruolo di vedova si connettono ad altri due aspetti: da un lato, l'autorità della donna nel matrimonio; dall'altro le conoscenze che le donne possedevano che potevano essere loro d'aiuto per poter affermare la loro autorità, anche intellettuale, sui mariti. Per quest'ultimo tema, *The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* di John Dunbar viene utilizzato come fonte per illustrare la contrapposizione tra autorità intellettuale maschile e femminile.

Questi elementi aiutano a dare un contesto ai due racconti in esame. Le storie si trovano all'interno di due opere, rispettivamente *The Canterbury Tales* e *Confessio Amantis*. Per entrambe le opere, propongo un'analisi di alcuni elementi fondamentali per definire il significato dei due racconti. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* è una delle tante storie all'interno dei *Canterbury Tales*: il suo narratore, la donna di Bath, rappresenta la donna di mezza età che scardina qualsiasi preconcetto sul ruolo di donna e di vedova. La donna di Bath è uno dei pochi narratori di cui si abbiano molte informazioni sulla vita e della quale si descriva la personalità: infatti, il prologo del suo racconto descrive la sua esperienza coniugale e questo aspetto aiuta la donna ad essere un narratore con la quale il pubblico riesce ad empatizzare. Tuttavia, è importante ricordarsi che la donna di Bath è creata da un altro

narratore che le dà voce, ovvero Chaucer. All'interno della tesi propongo due possibili punti di vista da cui interpretare il suo ruolo da narratore. Da un lato, Chaucer potrebbe utilizzare la donna di Bath come una parodia di tutto quello che una donna dell'epoca non riusciva a fare e ad essere, ovvero una donna in grado di esercitare autorità sul marito e rivendicarla attraverso le cose che dice. Dall'altro lato, Chaucer potrebbe fare l'esatto opposto, e dunque offrire alle donne del suo tempo nuovi modelli in cui riconoscersi senza negare totalmente quelli già esistenti. Quest'ultimo punto di vista si allinea con lo scopo che Chaucer dà alla raccolta: scardinare la gerarchia sociale da posizioni rigide e precostituite.

Il prologo generale presenta una prima immagine della donna di Bath: viene presentata come una persona che non si conforma ad un modello passivo e remissivo di donna, ma al contrario è insubordinata e provocatoria, incline a seguire un modello al di fuori di ogni regola. Questa immagine viene confermata nel prologo del suo racconto: al posto di essere un'introduzione alla storia, diventa un riassunto della sua vita, che la donna usa per rivendicare la sua autorità e per riaffermare il ruolo della donna nel matrimonio. In particolare, l'aspetto più interessante del Prologo sono i suoi diversi matrimoni: essendo stata sposata e rimasta vedova diverse volte, la donna di Bath sa per esperienza che cosa vuol dire beneficiare di autorità ed indipendenza dai propri mariti. All'interno del suo prologo, racconta nel dettaglio ogni esperienza coniugale, affermando la sua capacità di avere potere nella relazione. Con alcuni mariti, i più vecchi e ricchi, la donna riesce ad avere un ruolo dominante nel matrimonio: approfitta della loro ignoranza per dichiarare la sua posizione autorevole e cita fonti indiscutibili come la Bibbia per supportare la sua posizione. Con il suo quinto marito, Jankin, giovane e colto, usa strategie di inganno più subdole. Facendo credere al marito che in realtà è in controllo della situazione e facendogli provare pena per la sua condizione, la donna di Bath riesce ad esercitare su di lui un'influenza tale da affermare la sua esperienza come più autorevole rispetto alla posizione rivendicata dal marito, e ciò le garantisce autorità nel matrimonio. Il Prologo della donna di Bath è utile alla sua storia perché crea delle connessioni dirette con la sua rappresentazione della *loathly lady*, che possiamo definire come un riflesso della sua personalità. Infatti, nel personaggio della

loathly lady troviamo la stessa ambiguità della donna di Bath: da un lato, il desiderio di ricevere lealtà dal cavaliere; dall'altro lato, la sua capacità di persuasione che, alla fine della storia, le permette di avere un ruolo dominante sul cavaliere. Per la descrizione della donna di Bath, Chaucer si è servito di alcune fonti, tra cui la figura de La Vieille dal *Roman de la Rose*. Il confronto tra alcuni passaggi del poema con passi dal prologo evidenzia la stretta relazione tra queste due donne, entrambe desiderose di possedere autorità nel matrimonio. Adattando l'esperienza de La Vieille al suo scopo, Chaucer costruisce la donna di Bath, presentandola come una donna anticonvenzionale e promiscua che riesce ad usare le sue capacità e la sua esperienza per rivendicare la sua autorità nel matrimonio.

Il racconto di Gower, *The Tale of Florent*, è uno dei tanti racconti all'interno del poema intitolato *Confessio Amantis*. Strutturato in otto libri riguardanti ognuno un vizio diverso, il poema ha come obiettivo istruire i lettori sui giusti comportamenti ed azioni da mettere in atto per evitare di essere corrotti dal male, e per agire sempre secondo atteggiamenti di amore, giustizia ed onestà. Il protagonista della storia, Amans, rappresenta ogni persona che legge il poema: egli riceve consiglio da Genius, sacerdote di Venere, che lo istruisce sui vari vizi attraverso molteplici storie, principalmente tratte dalla tradizione classica, che lo aiutano a riconoscere i propri comportamenti erranei. Anche nel caso di Gower, il Prologo del poema è fondamentale per capire le intenzioni e il significato del racconto. Con il prologo, Gower presenta lo scopo del poema, che è trarre dal passato degli esempi che aiutino le persone ad agire tenendo sempre in considerazione l'amore. Tuttavia, il poema racchiude anche un significato politico, che il prologo esplicita chiaramente: tutti gli insegnamenti che Amans ottiene dalle varie storie sono indirizzati anche alla classe politica e regnante dell'epoca, in modo che anche le autorità dell'Inghilterra di fine quattordicesimo secolo, la Monarchia e la Chiesa, siano in grado di cambiare il loro comportamento per perseguire valori giusti e virtuosi. Infatti, il prologo presenta esplicitamente i disordini e i problemi che l'Inghilterra stava attraversando alla fine del secolo. Gower accusa sia la Monarchia che la Chiesa di essersi lasciate corrompere dal possesso di beni materiali e dal desiderio di potere, e di non essere state in grado di agire secondo giustizia ed etica. Da questo prologo, si evidenziano alcune differenze rispetto al Prologo della donna

di Bath. In Chaucer non troviamo alcuna critica esplicita come in Gower: questo è dovuto alla vicinanza che Chaucer aveva con il mondo della politica e della Chiesa. Inoltre, i due prologhi orientano le rispettive storie verso temi completamente diversi: la donna di Bath dà spazio al tema del ruolo della donna e della sua posizione nel matrimonio; il racconto di Gower si concentra sulla trasmissione di insegnamenti e su come l'amore può essere il motore attraverso cui sia il singolo che la società possono cambiare.

The Tale of Florent si trova all'interno del primo libro, che raccoglie storie riguardanti il vizio della superbia. In particolare, il racconto è un esempio di una manifestazione specifica della superbia: il lamento e la protesta. Le parole di Genius all'inizio della storia sottolineano come il racconto insegnerà ad Amans che la fiducia e l'amore che si vivono in una relazione sono molto più importanti di qualsiasi difficoltà e lamentele. Inoltre, in questo dialogo tra Amans e Genius che introduce la storia, si possono delineare alcune differenze tra i due narratori dei due racconti. Con la donna di Bath è possibile empatizzare perché esprime le sue emozioni e sentimenti; inoltre, la sua esperienza personale consente al lettore di relazionarsi direttamente con lei, e decidere se quanto dice è veritiero o meno. Genius, invece, è un narratore onnisciente: non fa trasparire alcun tipo di emozione e non si lascia coinvolgere dalle storie che racconta. L'obiettivo di Gower è quello di trasmettere degli insegnamenti e, per rendere credibili tali insegnamenti, Genius rimane quanto più distaccato possibile per evitare di intaccare la veridicità delle sue parole. Questa differenza si presenta anche dal punto di vista linguistico e stilistico. Le diverse scelte linguistiche, infatti, sottolineano ulteriormente la differenza tra due narratori completamente diversi. Questa differenza contribuisce al significato dei racconti stessi. Da un lato, nel racconto della donna di Bath si affronta il tema dell'autorità femminile nel matrimonio e il suo narratore è coinvolto personalmente nell'argomento. Dall'altro lato, l'obiettivo di Genius è quello di trasmettere insegnamenti veritieri su come poter agire contro la superbia e perseguire valori giusti ed onesti: perciò, è necessario mantenere un punto di vista obiettivo e razionale per evitare che i sentimenti influenzino l'attendibilità del racconto.

L'analisi del contesto letterario consente di avere una solida base da cui partire per l'analisi comparativa delle due storie. Un primo aspetto su cui mi sono soffermata è la descrizione dell'aspetto esteriore delle *loathly lady*. Ho notato una differenza interessante tra i due racconti. Le descrizioni di Chaucer sono brevi e prive di dettagli: ciò suggerisce non solo il diretto coinvolgimento della donna di Bath, che non vuole riconoscersi nei tratti estetici più ripugnanti, ma conferma anche l'obiettivo del narratore, ovvero dare un modello di donna che scardina i preconcetti sulla donna di mezza età. In questo modo, viene data importanza alle azioni e alle opportunità perseguibili dalle donne del periodo. Le descrizioni di Gower, invece, sono più dettagliate, e rispecchiano le aspettative dei lettori rispetto al personaggio della *loathly lady*. Tuttavia, queste descrizioni non sono collegate al tema della donna di mezza età, ma sono un mezzo attraverso il quale Gower parla della corruzione della natura umana e delle istituzioni. L'aspetto esteriore della *loathly lady* crea diverse aspettative rispetto allo sviluppo del personaggio e alle sue azioni. Anche in questo caso, tra i due racconti si delineano delle differenze. In Chaucer la trasformazione finale della *loathly lady* dà alla donna un potere d'azione sul cavaliere, invertendo i ruoli tra i personaggi. Questo risultato rispecchia il punto di vista della donna di Bath e il suo desiderio di possedere autorità nel matrimonio. In Gower le aspettative vengono soddisfatte con alcuni cambi nell'interpretazione del personaggio. La storia si concentra sulla figura maschile ma la *loathly lady* diventa il mezzo attraverso il quale Florent può aspirare ad una trasformazione morale del suo atteggiamento.

Un secondo aspetto analizzato è il cambio di significato del genere del romanzo cavalleresco. I due racconti utilizzano degli elementi tradizionali, ma gli autori cambiano il significato del genere letterario a seconda dello scopo che danno alla figura della *loathly lady*. Il racconto della donna di Bath, pur ambientato nel periodo arturiano, sembra essere irrilevante rispetto ai temi affrontati nel precedente prologo. Tuttavia, attraverso la donna di Bath, Chaucer utilizza il genere per fare ironia sulle rigide gerarchie che non funzionano né all'interno del romanzo cavalleresco, né all'interno della società in cui vive. Gower, invece, utilizza elementi provenienti dalla tradizione del romanzo cavalleresco per ambientare la storia in un passato più lontano, quello dell'antica Roma. L'obiettivo

di Gower è non essere troppo esplicito con le critiche rivolte alla società in cui vive ed evitare che i lettori utilizzino i pregiudizi sul genere cavalleresco per interpretare la storia.

Infine, i due racconti sono analizzati nel dettaglio prendendo in considerazione gli elementi in comune; per ogni elemento, vengono delineate le differenze di significato. Entrambe le storie iniziano con un crimine. In Chaucer, un cavaliere violenta una giovane fanciulla, e questo crimine presenta la figura maschile come egoista ed incurante delle conseguenze delle sue azioni, allontanandolo dalle aspettative sul suo ruolo. In Gower, Florent uccide un altro cavaliere la cui morte è causata dal desiderio di Florent di prevalere sull'altro per far valere la sua reputazione. Rispetto al cavaliere senza nome, Florent riconosce il proprio errore. Il crimine porta i cavalieri ad imbarcarsi nella stessa missione: trovare la risposta all'indovinello 'quello che le donne desiderano di più'. Il cavaliere della donna di Bath accetta di intraprendere la ricerca solo per salvarsi la vita; Florent accetta perché sa che è la giusta conseguenza per le sue azioni e mantiene la promessa per potersi redimere sia come cavaliere che come uomo.

La ricerca viene descritta in due modi diversi nei due racconti. La donna di Bath inserisce il suo punto di vista attraverso una digressione, il racconto delle orecchie di re Mida, che rappresenta la capacità della donna di usare l'inganno per rivendicare la sua autorità facendo credere agli uomini che hanno il controllo della situazione. Nel racconto di Gower, non troviamo alcuna digressione o commento personale perché il racconto deve essere quanto più oggettivo possibile per risultare credibile come insegnamento. Nel momento in cui i cavalieri sembrano aver rinunciato alla ricerca, incontrano la *loathly lady* nel bosco. Nel racconto della donna di Bath, il dialogo tra la *loathly lady* e il cavaliere mostra come all'apparenza la donna sia una figura di cui ci può fidare, ma in realtà riflette l'impertinenza e la sfacciataggine della donna di Bath. Infatti, il cavaliere si fida della *loathly lady* e accetta di ricompensarla se quest'ultima lo salva dandogli la risposta alla domanda. Tuttavia, non avendogli detto cosa vuole ottenere in cambio del suo aiuto, la donna lo induce a sposarla con l'inganno. Nel racconto di Gower, la *loathly lady* viene presentata come un personaggio più onesto, perché Florent sa in anticipo che la ricompensa che la *loathly lady* chiede è il matrimonio. Tuttavia,

questa parte della storia non si focalizza sulla donna, ma sul dilemma morale che Florent sta attraversando: sposarla per rimanere fedele alla sua etica di cavaliere, oltre che alla legge, oppure rifiutare ma rinnegare i valori in cui crede. Quindi, Florent riconosce che mantenere la promessa alla *loathly lady* lo aiuterà a redimersi e ad essere onesto verso sé stesso.

Dopo il matrimonio avvenuto in segreto, la *loathly lady* pone il cavaliere di fronte ad un'altra scelta, che deciderà le sorti della sua vita. Le circostanze sono molto simili nei due racconti, ma anche in questo caso, i due autori le modificano a seconda del significato della loro storia. Nel racconto di Chaucer, la scelta è introdotta da un lungo discorso che la *loathly lady* fa al cavaliere durante la loro prima notte di nozze. Dopo il matrimonio, il cavaliere non ha problemi ad esprimere alla *loathly lady* la sua rabbia e disagio nel trovarsi in questa situazione, mentre la *loathly lady* non riesce a capire il motivo di tale rabbia, e fa presente al cavaliere che la colpa della sua situazione è soltanto sua. Segue dunque una lunga predica con la quale la *loathly lady* parla di nobiltà d'animo e povertà. La *loathly lady* scardina i concetti di povertà e di nobiltà dal possesso materiale di beni e dalla ricchezza e dichiara come ogni persona, indipendentemente dalla posizione sociale, può essere nobile d'animo se è in grado di seguire i valori morali più importanti. Anche in questo caso, la *loathly lady* rispecchia la personalità della donna di Bath perché riesce a persuadere il cavaliere della veridicità del suo discorso, usando la religione cristiana come fonte, e riesce a esercitare potere sul cavaliere facendogli credere che la scelta finale (di averla bella ma infedele, o brutta ma leale) dipenda solo da lui. In realtà, il cavaliere lascia la decisione nelle mani della *loathly lady* e la sua cessione di autorità causa la trasformazione della *loathly lady* in una bellissima e giovane fanciulla. Nonostante sia difficile stabilire se la *loathly lady* possieda interamente l'autorità nel matrimonio, le parole finali del racconto dimostrano come la donna di Bath abbia dato un nuovo significato al motivo fiabesco: la *loathly lady* diventa un nuovo modello di donna in grado di rivendicare la sovranità nel matrimonio attraverso l'inganno, più o meno subdolo, dei mariti.

Nel racconto di Gower, l'attenzione rimane sul cavaliere: infatti, sono numerosi i passaggi in cui viene descritto il conflitto interiore di Florent che, pur accettando di sposare la *loathly lady* perché

sa che è la cosa giusta da fare, non riesce a trovare pace. Nonostante alcuni momenti in cui sembra che Florent stia rinunciando ai valori che lo rendono nobile d'animo, alla fine riconosce l'importanza di una coesistenza tra cosa la legge dichiara giusto, e cosa invece la morale dice sia giusto. Il dilemma morale di Florent ha anche un significato politico: sia la Monarchia che la Chiesa ignorano che è importante anche seguire un comportamento etico e morale, e si sono lasciate corrompere da azioni, giuste secondo il loro punto di vista, che portano profitto solo a loro. Alla fine, anche Florent lascia la decisione finale (avere la *loathly lady* bella o di giorno o di notte) nelle mani della donna. In questo caso, la sovranità data alla *loathly lady* non rappresenta l'autorità data alle donne nel matrimonio; rappresenta l'importanza dell'obbedienza ai valori morali che, a volte, chiede alle persone di rinunciare alla superbia e al potere per poter essere coerente con tali valori. Per questo, la trasformazione finale della *loathly lady* significa cambiare la propria prospettiva dopo aver riconosciuto tutti gli atteggiamenti che fanno agire contro la morale e l'etica e spingono verso la corruzione.

In conclusione, l'analisi de *The Wife of Bath's Tale* e *The Tale of Florent* mostra come un motivo fiabesco comune come la *loathly lady* possa avere molteplici significati a seconda delle scelte apportate dall'autore. Sia Chaucer che Gower si discostano da preconcetti ed aspettative sul modello e usano il motivo per affrontare tematiche che riguardano la società inglese di fine quattordicesimo secolo.

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