

Rehabilitating the Knight:
Problems with Evidence and the False Dilemma in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*

Does Chaucer's knight in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* undergo a moral transformation from a selfish rapist into an introspective, reformed man? The dominant criticism prefers to offer two choices: he either transforms completely or remains unchanged. Such a duality creates a false dilemma. In addition, critics representative of both views often make inadequate use of the text itself, resulting in flawed arguments. My analysis of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* examines the construction of the dominant critical perspectives, and develops a text-based analysis of the knight's character that more effectively frames this question of moral transformation.

There is something about the question of reform that polarizes many critics. It results in a false dilemma: only two choices and, therefore, two critical camps, are allowed when more could exist. Both camps generally treat their positions as self-evident, discouraging close examination of the text, often resulting in wildly ungrounded criticism. Such criticism occludes comprehension and analysis of the tale, undermining its *raison d'être*. Examples of this dualistic criticism occur in articles by Robert Meyer, Kathryn McKinley, Susan Crane, Michael Atkinson, Gerald Richman, Meredith Cary, and Theodore Silverstein. These critics often make inadequate use of the text to support their arguments about the knight and his transformation, and in two rather telling cases, cite only other critics *instead of* the text. With each of these critics, the ideas leading up to and following the dualistic arguments are consistently erudite and well-supported; however, the text consistently retreats into the background when they argue in favor of the knight either reforming completely or remaining static and unchanged.

Robert Meyer, for example, claims the Loathly Lady and her speech on “gentillesse” cause the knight to reform:

A good teacher, the hag builds upon the knowledge gained
in the first quest, using it later in the tale to lead the
bachelor to new truths about himself and the meaning of
love.¹

To establish that a convicted rapist who repeatedly fails to learn from his mistakes suddenly reforms as a result of excellent education would seem to require supporting evidence, but he provides none. Why is the Loathly Lady a good teacher? What are these new truths the knight sees within himself? How could a teacher effect changes of this magnitude on what appears to be an unwilling student? Meyer fails to answer these questions. A fine critic, Meyer would certainly not be trying to avoid these subjects. Rather, I believe it is the story itself that discourages such questions from being asked or answered.

The story progresses seamlessly if the critic assumes the knight transforms from an obstinate rapist to a sensitive, discerning man. This transformation or reformation gives the critic a sense of satisfaction—order is restored, an evil man has repented. Chaucer may even have intended his audience to identify with the knight: he is the central character, the rape scene is brief, and afterwards the victim vanishes from the tale. Awareness of the knight’s crime is suppressed, remaining unmentioned for the rest of the tale. In the end, the reader is told the two of them live happily ever after: “And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye.”² For this happy ending to be believable it helps to assume the knight has become a better man; otherwise, something feels rotten. As a

¹“Chaucer’s Tandem Romances: A Generic Approach to the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* as Palinode,” 229.

² WBT, 1257-8. All line references and ME quotes are to the text as it appears in *The Canterbury Tales Complete*, ed. Larry D. Benson. New York: Houghton, 2000.

result, critics have come up with varying ideas about how the knight “reforms” to bring about this happy ending.

On the same side as Meyer, Kathryn McKinley argues that the Loathly Lady’s lecture “becomes the means of the knight’s own final transformation.”³ As evidence, McKinley cites Susan Crane instead of Chaucer. Crane implies that the text is unnecessary, and that we can account for the knight’s transformation: “[o]nly by accepting that the knight has listened to his wife and been changed by her words.”⁴ According to Crane, there is no textual evidence to support the knight’s supposed transformation. Acceptance, or belief, is the only available form of evidence, and it is sufficient. Oddly, McKinley unquestioningly accepts Crane’s position of belief as sufficient evidence. Although lamentable, both of these critics’ perseverance despite a lack of textual evidence is likely reflective of the desire most readers have for the knight to become a better man who will make the Loathly Lady a good and decent husband. In addition to this desire, it is quite possible that narrative chronology is the reason even sensitive readers like Meyer and McKinley fall into error.

The chronology of events in the tale that are possibly responsible for Meyer and McKinley’s problems, in brief, is as follows: First the knight rejects the Loathly Lady as too ugly, old, and poor.⁵ Then the Lady lectures the knight and gives him his choice to have her ugly and necessarily faithful or beautiful and possibly faithless.⁶ Finally, the knight turns the choice over to the Loathly Lady, granting her the “maistrie” she most

³ “The Silenced Knight: Questions of Power and Reciprocity in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” 359.

⁴ Crane, qtd. by McKinley in “The Silenced Knight: Questions of Power and Reciprocity in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*,” 365.

⁵ “Thou art so loothly, and so oold also, / And thereto comen of so lough a kynde” (WBT, 1100-01)

⁶ “To han me foul and old til that I deye, / And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf... Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair” (WBT, 1220-3)

desires.⁷ A series of events in chronological order does strongly *imply* causality: one thing must *lead* to the next. The knight's choice comes after the Loathly Lady's speech, therefore her speech causes him to grant her "maistrie," therefore he has changed.

Although the sequence of events and their causes are straightforward, the conclusion that the knight has changed, made by Meyer and McKinley, is not. There is no *necessary* connection between the knight's choice and a "transformation," although it is seductive to think so. Just because the knight makes a decision that pleases the Loathly Lady, it does not follow that such a decision indicates he has undergone a transformation, moral or otherwise. Other critics presume causality, such as Michael Atkinson and Gerald Richman, who both argue the Knight's decision to offer "maistrie" indicates his moral transformation.

Michael Atkinson argues that the way the knight responds to the Loathly Lady's choice shows the knight has transformed:

[T]he transformation, though few have noticed, is quite remarkable. He suffers and sighs when he begins to ponder the problem...but when he comes to answer we hear not a grudging acceptance or a confession of defeat, but an affirmation.⁸

Atkinson gives us three possible choices of how to read the knight's answer: grudging acceptance, confession of defeat, or affirmation. Out of these three possibilities he chooses affirmation. However, for the knight's reply to be accurately described as an affirmation, it must be emphatically delivered. Just a few lines before, the knight was busy hemming and hawing over what choice to make, and demonstrating clearly that nobility is more a function of behavior than it is a function of birth. In light of that

⁷"Cheseth yourself which may be moost pleasance /And moost honour to yow and me also."(WBT, 1232-

⁸"Soul's Time and Transformation," 77.

reluctance, when the knight addresses the Loathly Lady as “My lady and my love, and wyfe so deere,”⁹ I cannot justify Atkinson’s interpretation without seeing additional supporting evidence. Within this context, the knight’s reply does not appear emphatic. It could just as easily be read as ironic: imagine the reply delivered in a despondent, defeated tone—one entirely in keeping with his reluctant behavior.

Even if the knight’s reply really *is* an affirmation, it does not necessarily mean he has “reformed.” It is true that his act of giving the Lady her choice contrasts with how he denied the maiden her choice at the tale’s beginning. However, the circumstances are sufficiently different as to render a comparison unlikely to yield anything illuminating about the knight’s character. When the knight raped the maiden, he was unconstrained, free to act on whim. When he sits alone with the Loathly Lady on their wedding-night, he is trapped and terrified of the shame he feels at being married to the Loathly Lady. That he cheerfully grants “maistrie” to the Loathly Lady because he is exhausted from his year-long quest and buffeted by her forceful speech appears at least as likely as the possibility that he has had an epiphany and now wants to give women what they most desire.

Gerald Richman claims the knight’s wretched wallowing, not his decision, on his wedding day is Chaucer’s way of showing the knight has transformed. Instead of using Chaucer’s language as support, he cites another critic as evidence for the knight’s transformation just as McKinley did:

Meredith Cary understands that actions speak louder than words: “...When he hides himself like an owl in shame over his condition and wallows wretchedly in bed at the mercy of his tormentor, the author is indicating that the knight is achieving a sympathetic insight into the results to

⁹ WBT, 1230.

the maid of his own earlier brutal and loveless act.”¹⁰

Putting aside for a moment the problem of citing another critic instead of the text to support his argument, Richman makes a problematic connection: although the knight is in an analogous situation to that of his rape victim, it does not follow that he *connects* his subsequent suffering to *hers*. As a sensitive reader imagining himself in the knight’s position, it is quite natural Richman would connect the knight’s suffering to the maiden’s. However, the knight has by his actions—forceful rape—demonstrated that he is not sympathetic or sensitive to the feelings of others.¹¹

At the opposite end of the critical spectrum, it is exactly this brutality of behavior upon which Angela Lucas focuses to make her claim that the knight is unchanged by the Loathly Lady’s speech. She argues:

The knight is not “converted.” There is no evidence of his “new vision” which can make [him] “worthy of [her] love.” He never fully and generously gives love, neither in the violent antithesis of love which he offers to the girl at the beginning of the *Tale*, nor at the end when sexual gratification is thrown to him eventually like a bone to a dog.¹²

Despite all of the criticism assuming the knight is indeed converted, Lucas leaves her rather controversial claim as it stands, and does not explore the matter further. Although it is problematic to cite evidence in favor of a negative argument, Lucas could have gone to the text for evidence supporting her idea of the knight’s static and sometimes vicious character. For example, she could have appealed to his pattern of seeking instant gratification, first with the rape, then later with his offer to exchange all of his wealth for

¹⁰ “Rape and Desire in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*,” 163.

¹¹ “By verray force, he raft hire maydenhed” (WBT, 888)

¹² “The Knight in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*,” 40.

his body's freedom.¹³ Instead, Lucas treats her statement as self-evident and allows it to remain unsupported.

Instead of taking merely taking sides, my last critic, Theodore Silverstein, examines why the knight turns his choice over Loathly Lady. He examines the options the Knight has been given, and concludes that the choice between fair and faithless or foul and faithful is impossible for the Knight to make for himself:

How could our knight, given his character and circumstance, be expected to choose for himself in terms like these? Dazzling with the lady's flawless attack... [he] responds with submissive generosity, "I leave it to you. Have it your own way, my dear."¹⁴

Silverstein gives us reasons why the choice is one the knight cannot make, but leaves them unexplained. We are given the knight's character and circumstance as reasons for this inability to choose for himself, but what do these words mean in this context? What is the knight's character? What is his circumstance? I hope to address these unanswered questions, at least in part.

Although it is indeed worthwhile to inquire into the Knight's character and actions, asking whether he "reforms" is the wrong question. Instead, let us consider whether he changes as a result of his experiences, and if so, in what way? When we are first introduced to the knight, it is only moments before he becomes a rapist; all we know about him is that he is a "lusty bachelor,"¹⁵ whose single meliorating characteristic is that he is not a murderer as well as a rapist— he does not kill his victim. As a rapist, we as an audience are likely to demonize the knight: he has committed a crime for which there can be no excuse or justification. However, we should be aware of this prejudice when

¹³ "By verray force, he raft hire maydenhed" and "Taak al my good and lat my body go." (WBT, 888;1061)

¹⁴ "The Wife of Bath and the Rhetoric of Enchantment; Or, How to Make a Hero See in the Dark," 173.

approaching his character. Rape is a heinous crime, but viewing the knight as completely reprehensible and looking no further does not get us to the happy ending we want.

Leaving our prejudices aside, we need to gather what we can from his behavior. For example, we can observe he is profoundly selfish and unsympathetic to the feelings of others. But we should not stop there. His actions following the rape allow us to compose a more complete picture of his character.

After the knight has been brought before the court to be judged, we learn he is unrepentant for his crime. He has been confined, and the confinement brings him suffering. However, his suffering is never connected with repentance. He is only described as being sorrowful in relation to his punishment: “Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh; / But what! He may nat do al as him liketh.”¹⁶ He sighs with sorrow because he has been caught. His conscience does not plague him because he has harmed an innocent woman. At no point does he appear to feel he has done anything wrong whatsoever. All he feels are his new limitations.

A limitation not new to the knight is his poor judgment. First it failed to prevent him from committing rape. In the aftermath, it failed to make him feel responsibility or guilt for his actions. Now it fails the knight in his attempts at choosing amongst the multiplicity of theories as to what women most desire. Wherever the knight goes, he cannot find any two women who agree, leaving him with an ever-increasing list of choices:

Somme seyde women loven best richesse,
Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse,
Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde,

¹⁵ WBT, 883.

¹⁶ WBT, 913-914.

And oftetyme to be wydwe and wedde.¹⁷

The knight has no idea what he is doing, nor does he know how to evaluate the answers he finds. It takes the Wife of Bath as narrator to explicitly inform us that he does indeed get close to the truth in his wanderings: “He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye.”¹⁸ The knight never has the faintest inkling.¹⁹ Now that the knight’s poor judgment has been established, I will consider his character, especially in light of his status as a member of the nobility.

The Knight blindly honors his word: “The day was come that homward moste he tourne.”²⁰ The word “moste” is the key: the knight does not even consider not returning for judgment, even though he has no confidence in any of the answers he has been given. Something prevents the knight from fleeing for his life; he does not know the Loathly Lady is waiting to give him the answer that will save his life. As far as he knows, he is returning for his execution. One would think that a knight who does not hesitate to commit rape would not hesitate to flee justice. Yet he never waivers from his mission to discover what women want, and when the time comes for him to return without having found the answer, he does so without hesitation. These actions can be explained in terms of his rank among the nobility, and the unwavering commitment to one’s word that comes with it.

Less dramatic than voluntarily attending one’s own execution, but which further illuminate his character as a member of the nobility, are the knight’s fine social graces. While returning to the court for his execution, the knight meets the Loathly Lady, the

¹⁷ WBT, 922-24.

¹⁸ WBT, 931.

¹⁹ “he saugh he myghte nat come... [to] what women love moost” (WBT, 985)

²⁰ WBT, 988.

foulest creature conceivable,²¹ but he addresses her with respect,²² and offers her a reward²³ for helping him with his quest. When the knight presents his answer in court, he does so “with manly voys,”²⁴ with confidence, even though he is unsure of his answer. He might only be respectful of the Loathly Lady because she is in a position to help him, or because she is a motherly, nonsexual figure he has no desire to take advantage of. He might only return to the court because he lacks the creativity or intelligence to escape. He might only deliver his answer with confidence to the court in order to bluff them. However, we must remember he is a knight in Arthur’s court.²⁵ The knight is a nobleman, and an allegiance to the rules of chivalric behavior is a probable explanation for his actions following the rape.

Up to this point, aside from the rape, the knight’s actions can be understood in terms of nobility, or at least in its external trappings, but there can be no nobility found in the knight’s treatment of his savior. Upon hearing the Loathly Lady’s request of him, he laments and asks her to make a new request. He does not want to marry her, although he does want to repay her for her help. He suggests she “Taak al my good and lat my body go.”²⁶ Such a response, in light of his oath to do the next thing she asks of him, is inappropriate at best and offensive at worst. When the knight learns that the Loathly Lady also wishes to be his love, he loses all tact: “‘My love?’ quod he, ‘nay, my dampnacioun!’”²⁷ To declare one’s savior to be one’s damnation is rather distant from noble behavior, and it illuminates a little more of the knight’s character: he deals with

²¹ “A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.” (WBT, 999)

²² “My levee mooder,” (WBT, 1005)

²³ “I wolde wel quite youre hire.” (WBT, 1008)

²⁴ WBT, 1036.

²⁵ “this kyng Arthour / Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelere,” (WBT, 883)

²⁶ WBT, 1061.

²⁷ WBT, 1067.

adversity much as a child might: with an immediate emotional response. Although, in fairness, to be his love is the second thing the Loathly Lady has asked of him, and he was only bound to perform the “nexte thyng that I requere thee,”²⁸ This legalistic loophole escapes his attention.

Continuing in his ignoble behavior, after the wedding the knight childishly hides²⁹ from the Loathly Lady. While this might be an entirely natural response, it is nonetheless dishonorable. When evening comes and the knight can no longer hide from the Loathly Lady, he comes to bed in distress: “Greet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thought, / Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought.”³⁰ To harshly judge the knight because he was distressed by the thought of sleeping with the foul creature would be patently unfair. But if we cannot judge him for his feelings, we can certainly judge him for his actions: his subsequent behavior to the Loathly Lady is offensive and puerile: “He walweth and he turneth to and fro.”³¹ The knight is throwing a temper tantrum. Such immature behavior strongly suggests his character has remained static throughout the tale.

However, a turning point is coming. In what I believe is the most revealing speech the knight makes, he asks the Loathly Lady to “Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance/ And most honour to yow and me also.”³² Before this point, there is no evidence suggesting the knight ever sees anything from another’s perspective. An important development has occurred: the knight has proved himself capable of empathy. To make that statement, he must have considered how she would feel in both situations.

²⁸ WBT, 1010.

²⁹ “And al day after hidde hym as an owle” (WBT, 1081)

³⁰ WBT, 1083-4.

³¹ WBT, 1085.

While this response proves the knight capable of growth, it also shows him capable of wit: it is a subtle jab at the Loathly Lady. Since neither option will result in honor for either of them, his response could have a hostile edge to it. He is asking her to choose for herself which of the two will bring the most honor to them both, when neither choice can do so. It is noteworthy that the Loathly Lady honors his request by creating a third, pleasing alternative where before there were only two equally insufferable horns of a dilemma.

She makes herself beautiful and faithful, but there is no mention of riches.³³ Yet the knight never again mentions her lack of wealth and social position, even though he was bitterly bemoaning her lack of both only moments before. Has the knight had some new insight into the nature of nobility as a result of the Loathly Lady's speech, and no longer values wealth and social position? Possibly, but probably not. After the speech and her metamorphosis, he appears content to have her poor and without a title. It is tempting to conclude she convinced him that wealth and social position are not important. However, he could just as easily have concluded that having a beautiful and faithful wife is sufficiently superior to the alternatives that he should be grateful and hold his tongue.

After the Loathly Lady offers the knight his choice of having her beautiful and perhaps faithless, or ugly and necessarily faithful, he tells her it makes no difference to him: "I do no fors the wheither of the two."³⁴ What is the implication here? Has the knight learned from his past, from the Loathly Lady's speech, and is he applying what he has learned about what women most desire to his current situation? Again, probably not. More likely, the knight is implying that both choices are entirely unacceptable— it does

³² WBT, 1232-3.

³³ "she so fair was, and so yong therto." (WBT, 1251)

not matter how he chooses. Either way, the knight loses face, suffers further dishonor. If the Lady is faithless, the knight will be mocked as a cuckold, and his wife will be ridiculed for promiscuity. If the Lady retains her hideous appearance, even the faith of a Griselda³⁵ would not insulate her from dishonor, and her husband from pity. The knight appears to have a choice between pity and ridicule. Neither choice appeals to him, and it is in this moment that the knight gains some insight, looking at the situation from the Loathly Lady's perspective.

Moving on, it seems reasonable to conclude that if the knight is capable of learning empathy, he might also be capable of other changes. Since some of the knight's subsequent behaviors appear to coincide with some of the Loathly Lady's exhortations, it also seems reasonable to conclude that the speech might have influenced him, albeit probably not in the profound, epiphany-inducing manner many critics have desired. To test this idea, it is useful to examine the number of lines the Loathly Lady puts into refuting each of the knight's initial complaints: poverty, lack of nobility, old age, and foulness. Presumably, the number of lines devoted to each defense has a relationship with the importance she places on the refutation of each complaint.

The Loathly Lady spends most of her time responding to the knight's attack on her poverty and lack of noble birth. A person can have nobility even if lowly born, because it comes from God alone,³⁶ poverty was valued by Christ.³⁷ As to foulness and old age, all the Loathly Lady says is that foulness guarantees chastity,³⁸ and that old age

³⁴ WBT, 1234.

³⁵ An archetype of patience who placidly endured systematic torture.

³⁶ "gentillesse cometh fro God alone" (WBT, 1162)

³⁷ "The hye God... In willful poverte chees to lyve his lyf." (WBT, 1178-9)

³⁸ "filthe and eelde... Been grete wardeyns upon chastitee." (WBT, 1213-16)

demands respect.³⁹ The greatest bulk of her one hundred and seven-line speech is spent addressing nobility from line 1109 to line 1176, and poverty from line 1177 to line 1206. This leaves only ten lines for age and ugliness— six for age,⁴⁰ and four for ugliness.⁴¹ The last two defenses feel abbreviated and almost tacked on, especially in comparison to the greater extent and force of the defenses against low birth and poverty. The Loathly Lady argues forcibly and at the greatest length that noble birth does not necessitate noble character⁴² and that poverty is not to be despised.⁴³ It makes sense she would apportion her efforts in this way. She most strongly argues against the importance of the qualities she is not willing or able to change. Although the knight was never placed in a position to respond to either old age or ugliness, from what we already know of him, presumably the Loathly Lady could guess that no number of words could convince him that ugliness and old age are desirable in a mate, but that he might be flexible on the subjects of low birth and poverty.

Thus, the knight has shown himself to be capable of empathy, and to be open to persuasion on the subjects of poverty and low birth. He was certainly defeated, but was he actually changed by the Loathly Lady's words? Without more information, I think we cannot make a determination one way or the other. We can say he was affected by the Loathly Lady's words, but only to the degree that he is forced to concede to the power of her arguments in defense of low birth and poverty. He might still disagree, but he could be so cowed by her forcible arguments that he will not dare to contradict her.

Whatever the reason, the tale ends with the knight happily married to a beautiful

³⁹ "men sholde an oold wight doon favour" (WBT, 1210-12)

⁴⁰ WBT, 1206-12.

⁴¹ WBT, 1213-16.

⁴² "To do gentil dedes that he kan; / Taak hym for the grettest gentil man." (WBT, 1115-6)

and faithful woman. It is worth noting that the Loathly Lady now bears external resemblance to the rape victim from the beginning of the tale: physically appealing, but lacking money and high social standing. It is in this sense that the knight has really changed. He is now content in marriage with the same manner of woman he would look at only as an object of rape one year earlier.

⁴³ “Glad povertie is an honest thing, certeyn” (WBT, 1183)

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