

## Quest and Question in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

DIANE SPEED

*The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* are at present, it seems, the most popular part of *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>1</sup> The marked increase of interest in this particular pilgrim and her performance over recent years has mainly been due to the fact that, as the only woman of the world amongst the pilgrims, themselves characters in the best-known of medieval English fictional narratives, the Wife has become a major focus of attention for feminist discourses.<sup>2</sup> At a time when it is usual to diminish the significance of the individual narrative voice in favour of the narrative itself, this pilgrim-narrator is commonly treated as a somewhat more important text than her own tale.

The Wife is directly constructed in the portrait of her in the *General Prologue* (445–76) and in her own *Prologue*, in which she sets out her views on marriage in a lively, often outrageous manner and illustrates them with an account of her own five marriages. Much of her argument here takes as its starting-point anti-feminist materials of the kind that pervade medieval literature. With its gusto and its sheer length, some eight hundred lines, the *Prologue* tends to

- 1 As one indication, The Canterbury Tales Project from Cambridge University Press, putting on CD-Rom all pre-1500 texts of *The Canterbury Tales*, has begun with the text of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The edition of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* referred to here is that in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, Oxford, 1988, pp. 105–22, with explanatory notes by Christine Ryan Hilary, pp. 864–74.
- 2 See, for example, Lee Patterson, '“For the Wyves love of Bathe”: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the Roman de la Rose and the Canterbury Tales', *Speculum* 58 (1983), 656–95; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, WI, and London, 1989), ch. 4, '“Glose/bele chose”: The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators', pp. 113–31; Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Feminist Readings, Hemel Hempstead, 1991).

overshadow the four-hundred-line *Tale*, and it is therefore not surprising to find that critical discussion of the *Tale* is often secondary to discussion of the *Prologue*.<sup>3</sup> This article, however, addresses itself specifically to the *Tale*, referring to the *Prologue* only insofar as it supplies the immediate context. Its particular concern is to show that narrative tensions in the *Tale* can be understood as manipulations of generic expectation which disturb the reader and demand a response to the questions they raise.

The story told in the *Tale* is that of a young knight in King Arthur's days who rapes a maiden, is brought to judgment for this crime before the queen and her ladies, and is sentenced by them, on pain of death, to find the right answer to the question, 'What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren' (905). He searches for the answer in vain, but, at the end of the year he has been allowed, he comes upon a mysterious old hag who, in return for his promise to grant her whatever she wishes, agrees to give him the right answer before night. She accompanies him back to court, where he repeats the answer she then gives him, namely that women most desire to have 'sovereynetee' (1038) or 'maistrie' (1040) over their husbands. When this answer is accepted, the hag reveals her wish, that he marry her. On their wedding night, he turns away from her, and she responds with a long lecture addressing his objections to her, centred on an explanation of true 'gentillesse' (1109-76). She then offers him the choice of having her an ugly but faithful and dutiful wife, or having her beautiful but never being certain of her fidelity. The knight leaves the choice to her, thereby granting her the 'maistrie' (1236-38), whereupon she becomes both beautiful and faithful, and they live happily ever after.

- 3 Derek Pearsall, for example, using a basically generic set of headings in *The Canterbury Tales* (Unwin Critical Library, London, 1985), does not include the *Tale* in his chapter 'Romances', even though he notes there that it resembles another romance, *The Franklin's Tale*, in being a folktale involving magic (p. 144). Instead, he discusses the *Tale* as a follow-up to the *Prologue* in the chapter 'Some Portraits', clearly indicating a primary concern with the Wife herself.

The narrative as outlined, however, actually contains a substantial amount of overt argument, notably in the narrator's digressions on the danger friars pose for women (864–81) and on possible answers to the question (931–51), her exemplary tale of Midas (952–82), the hag's lecture (1109–1218), and the narrator's conclusion (1257–64). Almost half the *Tale* is given over to this discursive material, which alone is enough to indicate that a satisfactory reading of the *Tale* must go beyond an appreciation of simple entertainment value as story. But the narrative itself also presents conflicts of direction that problematize the reader's, or audience's, expectations and confidence in making a response, and demand intellectual participation.

The focal character, the one whose story this is, is, of course, the young knight—as the Wife says herself (983). The maiden is present for only three lines in the preliminary action, where she is acted upon (886–88), and is not referred to again; the queen and court function in the action only as a collective *deus ex machina*, to determine the parameters of the knight's on-going life; and the hag, not present till the latter part of the tale, functions within that life, albeit as a major circumstance in it, the site of its transformation. The knight, on the other hand, is present in, and the cause of, every scene.

He is, in fact, the protagonist of two stories. In the first, preliminary story, he is an aggressor, who is appropriately brought to account for a crime against another member of society. In the second, he is the hero who faces socially imposed tests and wins through to personal happiness. His two roles sit ill together, and are an obvious source of narrative tension. As a hero undertaking a difficult quest, he is to be cheered on by the reader, but his initial role as a rapist has already alienated the reader, and, without any visible remorse on his part (he merely feels sorry for himself when sentenced: 913), or any effort on his part to make restitution to the injured party, this alienation is not resolved and is therefore only partly relegated as the reader accompanies him on his quest. A reflex of the reader's

discomfort at the reason he has had to undertake the quest in the first place, moreover, surfaces in the last episode, where his ill-mannered lack of gratitude to the one who has saved his life evokes dislike, albeit at the same time as pity for his plight in being married to a hag evokes sympathy. The 'parfit joye' (1258) of the knight and his bride as the story ends cannot constitute a fully acceptable closure to the narrative when there is no repentance for the past on the part of the knight (he is merely lectured into submission by the hag: 1236–38), nor any comment on the outcome of events for the individual he has injured, even if society's requirement of punishment for a crime against itself has been met.

It has long been recognized that the essential story is a version of the folktale known as 'the Loathly Lady'. Other versions from medieval England include two late, popular chivalric romances, *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, and 'The Tale of Florent' from the *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower, Chaucer's friend, told to exemplify the narrator's point that it is best to be obedient in love.<sup>4</sup> The generic forms of these three versions are the same as those through which *The Wife of Bath's Tale* moves: its ultimate impact is as a tale told to make a point, or several points, but the narrative of the quest unfolds largely through reference to conventions of chivalric

4 For these works see *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure and The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen A. Shepherd (Norton Critical Edition, New York, 1995), pp. 243–67 and pp. 380–87, respectively, and *Confessio Amantis*, l.1396–1864, in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols., Early English Text Society es 81–82 (London, 1900–1901). Texts of these works are also provided, together with some discussion of relationships, in Bartlett J. Whiting, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (1941; repr. New York, 1958), pp. 223–68. For detailed discussion of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and its analogues see, for example, Sigmund Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder* (Wexford, 1957); Hilary's notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*; and Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford, 1989), pp. 157–60.

romance, evoked in the basic narrative elements of setting, character, and plot. A helpful recent description of its generic affiliations places it 'in the borders between folktale—even fairytale—and romance'.<sup>5</sup>

Detailed comparison of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* with other versions of the folktale indicates the main areas in which Chaucer's tale is distinctive. These include the anonymity of the protagonists; the rape as the incident occasioning the quest; the queen and her ladies as those who test the knight; the fact that the hag does not explain her precise demand in advance; her lecture; and the nature of the choice she offers him. All these factors, it will be seen, function to subvert the expectations of chivalric romance and are prominent amongst the elements that work to construct the story, rather, as an intellectual challenge to the reader. The discussion that follows traces the evocation of romance and fairytale conventions and their subversion through the *Tale*.

The opening lines establish a general setting in the remote past of Arthurian legend that forms the background to many chivalric romances:

In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,  
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,  
Al was this land fulfild of fayerye. (857–59)

The reference to the Bretons associates the *Tale* with the Breton lays, those short romances which are familiar to

- 5 Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 156. Other critics, too, unlike Pearsall (see above, n. 3), have readily associated the *Tale* with romance: J. A. Burrow identifies the *Tale* as a romance 'divergent from that stereotype': *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge, 1986), p. 109; in a cultural study, Louise O. Fradenburg describes it as the product of a post-feudal society 'that feels itself torn between past and future', a 'bourgeois romance' that experiments with 'romance poetics': 'The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 (1986), 31–58: 36 and 55–56; and in a study of broad relations between genre and theme, Susan Crane finds in the *Tale* 'transitions between satire and romance': 'Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*', *PLMA* 102 (1987), 20–28: 23.

modern readers through numerous mentions of lost Breton compositions and actual extant texts of what are presumably imitations of these in medieval French and English, such as *The Franklin's Tale* purports to be.<sup>6</sup> The expectation is immediately raised that the narrative to follow will not only be set in Arthur's days, but will be concerned above all with love, and will probably involve magic. This last expectation is instantly confirmed in lines 859–61, and borne out in the action. But the expectation of a focal concern with love is first thrown in doubt, by the Wife's subsequent digression (864–81) on the dangers to women presented in the past by elves and in the present by friars (the pilgrim Friar has just mocked her personally: 829–31), then confounded, as the first action of the knightly protagonist is to commit a rape, the very antithesis of an act of love (884–88), and finally paid a kind of lip-service, in the conubial bliss he finally achieves with the transformed hag.

No one other than Arthur is ever named. Romances typically represent themselves as recounting true events of actual people in the distant past, and names, at least for the main figures, are important as identification of an individual. In some cases, names actually indicate a legendary person of significance in the culture of the writer and his audience, and sometimes they have a symbolic significance of a general kind. Leaving the main figures unnamed in the *Tale* allows their significance to rest in the ideas they represent, not in their individual lives or personalities.

The particular circumstances of the act of rape, which is unique to Chaucer's version of the story as the event initiating the quest, emphasize the subversion of chivalric romance. The episode begins with the expression 'bifel that'

6 See *The Franklin's Prologue* (709–15); *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale* are found in *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 178–89. Relevant features of the Breton lay are discussed, for example, by Katherine Hume, 'Why Chaucer Calls the *Franklin's Tale* a Breton Lai', *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972), 365–79, and Diane Speed, 'Character and Circumstance in The Franklin's Tale', *Sydney Studies in English* 15 (1989–90), 3–30.

(882), the typical vocabulary of adventure with its inevitable connotations of chance, along with a further reference to Arthur (882), the introduction of a likely hero in the 'lusty bachelor' (883), and the presentation of a particular setting for the first scene, the knight's ride home 'fro ryver' (884). This scene is the civilized site of a familiar courtly pastime, hawking for water birds along the river bank. Against such a backdrop, the rape is unexpected and uncivilized, the very language used of it insisting on the violence and outrage:

... maugree hir heed,  
 By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed:  
 For which oppressioun was swich clamour ... (887-89)

A meeting between a knight and a maiden in Arthurian romance is much more likely to result in his coming to her aid in some way, even preventing or avenging an act of rape. Again, a knightly hero may run foul of some established custom in a romance or accidentally injure someone, but he will not be a proven criminal justly receiving a straightforward death sentence at the hands of a legendary ideal court.

The queen, to whom the king hands him over for alternative sentencing at the pleading of her ladies and herself, constitutes a reader of the knight's conduct *within* the text with whom the reader *outside* the text is to concur. This concern with the assessment of events takes up issues raised in the Wife's *Prologue*: there she declares (1) that her (female) 'experience' will authenticate her exposition of marriage better than (male) 'auctoritee', and records her scorn of her fifth husband's misogynist book-learning (634-793), a model of the female assuming the male role of judge. Thematically, the queen and her ladies, along with the hag, represent the triumph of the female over male domination. Dramatically, their success is one instance of wish-fulfilment for the Wife. Generically, they recall a kind of writing which can be viewed as the opposite of romance, with its inherent fantasy. In the courtly literature of France, female judgment of men occurs, for example, in the best-known of several treatises on love, the *De Amore* of Andreas Capellanus (c.

1200), which includes decisions about questions of love made by various noble women, either independently or in a 'court of love' (2.7).<sup>7</sup> Such writing relies on the school-room procedures of debate, the methodical investigation of hypothetical situations along rhetorical lines. This episode reinforces the critical stance of the Wife's earlier digression on friars and foreshadows further verbal victories for women in the course of the *Tale*.

Quests in chivalric romance may be initiated by various circumstances, but the quest as a test of worth imposed by the lady a knight seeks to impress, or someone associated with her, is a common feature. Here, however, there is more than one lady behind the quest, namely, the knight's victim in an act of perverted love and his literal sovereign, neither of them a lady-love. Usually, a quest involves forgoing safety to face uncertainty and danger. Here, it involves tentatively leaving behind the certainty of death to seek a possible reprieve. Again, chivalric quests typically involve the acquisition of significant wisdom and increased honour through a display of prowess or endurance of hardship. Here, the 'wysdom' sought (994) is merely the answer to a riddling question that the ladies of the court already know (1043-45); no prowess or endurance of hardship is displayed in the journeying and no honour is involved, only the possibility of being allowed to stay alive. The conventional period of a-year-and-a-day allowed for the quest (909) emphasizes its departure from these other conventions.

The actual narrative of the quest events, which might have been expected to occupy a substantial and central place in a romance, is minimal. The impression of a long hard search

7 Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (London, 1982). In one section of this treatise (1.11) the view is offered, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, that a nobleman may ravish any common girl who takes his fancy; but even if such a view were to be taken at face value it would not necessarily apply here, because the class of the 'mayde' in the *Tale* is not indicated. For the possibility of a connection with 'courts of love' see, for example, Hilary's note to line 1028 in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

for the right answer is given, rather, through a lengthy discourse, which falls into three sections. First, there is an apparently objective account of a number of different responses offered to the knight by different people (925–28). This account is then continued in a transformed way as the Wife enters the discourse in the first person, commenting on such responses on behalf of all women ('we', 'us', 'oure') (929–51).<sup>8</sup> And these comments in turn pass into a tale within the *Tale*, as the Wife relates an idiosyncratic version of the story of Midas and his ass's ears from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (952–82), reworked to make the point that women cannot keep a secret.

This triple discourse clearly advances the broad enquiry of the *Prologue and Tale* into such questions as those of male-female relationships, the gendering of authority and power, and the epistemology of true knowledge. In doing so, it makes a mockery of the idea of a conventional quest by almost completely removing the ostensible questor. The narrative quest is replaced by a textual quest on the part of the reader, who is drawn into the text to engage in a personal pursuit of knowledge via consideration of the range of arguments presented but, at this stage, left unresolved.

Returning to the narrative after her long departure from it with the aid of a rhetorical transition,

This knyght, of which my tale is specially, (983)

the Wife places the knight firmly in a romance context. He has come, suspensefully, to the last day allowed him (988). Chance (989), the essence of adventure, brings him along the edge of a forest (990), the setting *par excellence* of adventure, the wild place outside the bounds of courtly control, where he finds a number of women dancing (991–

8 The shift from the past tense 'seyde' (925–29) to the present 'seyen' (935) may imply that the later responses are introduced by the Wife from her own experience outside her *Tale*, or it may simply be an instance of the alternation between past and present common to much Middle English narrative.

92). Their fairy nature is made clear as they suddenly vanish before his eyes (995–96), and this recalls to the reader the narrator's opening evocation of the romantic past and the statement that in Arthur's days the elf-queen and her ladies used to dance in the fields (860–61). Once more the knight comes across a lone woman, but this encounter is in every way the reverse of his previous encounter with the maiden. There, the woman was human and young, and he took what he wanted from her without payment; here, the woman is a fairy and old, and he begs her for help, prepared, in his desperation, to pay whatever she might ask in return—the fact that, in Chaucer's version of the story alone, the hag does not specify her wish at this point makes the contrast with the rape scene, which is itself unique to Chaucer's version, the more stark. Paradoxically, the uncivilized conduct of the knight took place in a civilized setting, whereas his civilized conduct here takes place in an uncivilized setting.

The fairy women the knightly heroes sometimes come upon in forests in romances are often beautiful and seductive, but the lone figure who remains when the dancers vanish is an ugly old woman; mysterious old women in fairytales may prove either a help or a hindrance to the hero or heroine. A romance or fairytale situation of some kind, however, is suggested by the nature of the agreement the knight makes with her. When he tells her the question he must answer, she says she will supply that answer in exchange for his 'trouthe' (1009), his word, that he will do whatever she asks of him, and he responds, 'Have heer my trouthe' (1013). This open promise on his part is recognizable as a 'rash promise' of the kind that inevitably creates complications in fairytale or romance: in *The Franklin's Tale* (998), for instance, the lady uses the same words as this knight to give a rash promise she comes to regret.

The hag's lecture covers a range of topics well-known from clerical discourses. Basing her arguments on authorities that include Christ himself, she makes clear that the knight's objections to her as being low-born, poor, old, and ugly are not acceptable. The lecture occupies three-eighths of the

*Tale*, but its significance is almost entirely intellectual rather than narrative. It culminates in the choice she offers the knight, another question he must answer. Again, he chooses to rely on her, and the outcome reached thereby appears to demonstrate the thesis of *The Wife's Prologue and Tale*, that both men and women will find happiness if women have the 'maistrie' in the marriage relationship.

That the loathly lady offers the man a choice here is part of the basic folktale, but the particular choice presented is unique to Chaucer. The choice in the other versions is a fairytale one: the lady can be fair by day and foul by night, or foul by day and fair by night. Chaucer's version is quite different: the lady can be foul but faithful, or fair but of uncertain fidelity (1219–27). It has been pointed out that this set of alternatives belongs, not to fairytale or romance, but to the world of male clerical learning, with its misogynist suppositions.<sup>9</sup> It therefore belongs, also, to the world of intellectual debate about supposed realities of life, not to the world of fairy magic and romance. Although the hag is the actual fairy in the *Tale*, she is, paradoxically, the figure who articulates the most rigorous intellectual processes.

The achievement of the happily-ever-after end of the narrative, which in itself accords with the usual expectations of romance and fairytale, is followed by closing remarks in the Wife's narratorial voice, as established in her *Prologue* and echoed after a fashion in the *Tale's* digressions on friars and possible answers to the queen's question:

... Jhesu Crist us sende  
 Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,  
 And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;  
 And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
 That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
 And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
 God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1258–64)

9 For a history of the idea that women will belong in one or other of these categories, neither of them pleasant to a man, see Margaret Schlauch, 'The Marital Dilemma in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*', *PMLA* 61 (1946), 416–30.

Romances often close with a pious reference to God, sometimes a request for prayer for the poet, as at the end of *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, sometimes the expression of a desire that both the poet and his readers may know God's blessing, as at the end of another fairy romance, Thomas Chestre's imitation Breton lay *Sir Launfal*:

Jhesus, that ys Hevenekyng,  
 Yeve us alle Hys blessyng,  
 And Hys modyr Marye! (1042-44)<sup>10</sup>

The 'we' of such an expression positions the poet and all persons of good will who read or hear the work as united in the hope of eternal salvation.

The last words from the Wife are a contrast in every way. They position 'Jhesu' and 'God' as agents of the Wife's will, rather than as those to whom undeserving humanity should appeal for mercy: the misuse of the word 'grace' (1260) draws attention to the inversion of the proper roles. The hopes expressed are totally mundane, and, moreover, articulated in unchristian terms as gratification for the Wife and her faction and destruction for those who oppose them. The 'we' functions divisively to include some and exclude others, and thus works counter to the generosity of spirit that is typical of romance.

Critics have not always agreed in their understanding of the ideas constructed by the Wife's *Prologue and Tale*, some, for example, finding it a feminist, some an antifeminist document. Perhaps the divisiveness of the closing passage actually reinforces the spirit of contention and debate that characterizes the preceding narrative of the *Tale*, with its sequence of evocations and subversions of romance optimism. The resulting problematization is can be seen as a challenge to the reader, in his or her quest for knowledge, just as the central question posed explicitly in the story is a challenge to the knight in his quest to save his life.

10 This poem is edited by A. J. Bliss (London and Edinburgh, 1960), spelling is regularized in the lines quoted.