

Amber Thomas

Engl 325

Final Research Paper

4 December 2019

A Comparative Analysis of Chivalrous Virtues and Gender Roles in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

Geoffrey Chaucer analogizes a knight from King Arthur's court, such as Sir Gawain in the anonymous text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* to challenge preconceived ideologies of chivalrous virtues. By depicting a knight that sexually assaults and abuses the mercy of the women around him, Chaucer promotes speculation of the nobility and social change of the masculine gender role knights symbolize in England during the Medieval Period. Chaucer's rhetorical choice to write *TWBT* as a satire also promotes the empowerment of women as a result of showcasing how toxic masculinity can lead to the manipulation of women, including the narrator herself who is unaware of how she is also being manipulated.

Chaucer uses an analog of King Arthur's court to create expectations of chivalry for the knight in *TWBT*. He connects the two analogous characters from *SGGK* and *TWBT* by setting them in the same world: King Arthur's court. In *SGGK*, the narrator sets the scene with: "... of the Britain kings / Arthur was always judged noblest / ... And so an actual adventure I mean to relate..." (*SGGK* ll. 25-27). In *TWBT*, the story is immediately set in King Arthur's world. "In th'olde dayes of Kyng Arthour..." (*TWBT* ll. 857). Later, King Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere, grants the knight a year and a day to complete his journey that will end in his execution if he

does not succeed (*TWBT* ll. 908 - 910). Sir Gawain is given the same amount of time by the Green Knight that may also end in his execution (*SGGK* l. 298). Another result of the Arthurian setting is the presence of supernatural beings which appear in *SGGK* as well as *TWBT*. In *SGGK*, the Green Knight is otherworldly as the other knights of the court believe that he is of “phantasm or magic” (*SGGK* l. 240) because he is dressed in all green and has red eyes. The supernatural being in *TWBT* is the elf disguised as an old hag that later transforms into a beautiful, young wife for the knight. The wife and narrator of the tale describes the magical elements of the Arthurian world at the beginning of the tale with “Al was this land fulfild of fairye. / The Elf Queen with hir joly compaignye / Daunced ful ofre in many a grene mede” (ll. 859-861). The Green Knight as well as the elf woman in *TWBT* are what drive the conflict of each story; Sir Gawain’s journey is assigned to him by the Green Knight to fulfill his promise and the knight in *TWBT* learns what women most desire from the elf woman. Although Chaucer may not be directly analogizing Sir Gawain from *SGGK* to the knight in *TWBT*, it is clear that he is using a knight from the Arthurian world that is very similar to Sir Gawain to satirize romances like *SGGK*. In the article “Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre” from *The Chaucer Review* journal, Liu states “We recognize Arthur and Gawain as inhabitants of romance, of course...” (Liu 341). Chaucer’s Medieval Period audience had preconceived expectations of how the knight in *TWBT* will act like how a knight should - chivalrously - because of previous texts like *SGGK*.

With the five chivalrous virtues and typical romance genre associated with King Arthur’s court’s knights that are demonstrated in *SGGK*, Chaucer sets expectations of how the similar knight in *TWBT* will act out the chivalric virtues, especially towards women. The five chivalric

virtues represented by one of the five facets of the pentangle on Sir Gawain's shield are fidelity, chastity, piety, courtesy, and generosity (*SGGK* ll. 651-654). Sir Gawain successfully follows the expectations set by these five virtues that together create a chivalrous knight, according to the Green Knight's judgement. "... You faithfully and truly kept your pledged word, / Gave me all your winnings, as an honest man should..." (*SGGK* ll. 2348-2349). However, the Green Knight adds that Sir Gawain slightly failed his test of King Arthur's court's virtue because Sir Gawain did not return the girdle Sir Bertilak's wife gave him (*SGGK* ll. 2366-2368). Sir Gawain confesses and is ashamed of breaking the chivalrous virtue of fidelity, so the Green Knight tells him, "The wrong you did me I consider wiped out. / You have so cleanly confessed yourself, admitted your fault, / ... I declare you absolved of that offence..." (*SGGK* ll. 2390-2393). In *SGGK*, Sir Gawain learned from his mistake and was rightly forgiven for his offence because he reflected the chivalric virtue of courtesy well by confessing. The chivalric virtues being written into a romance story with a happy ending is how ideologized masculinity was defined and popularized in the culture of England during the Medieval Period.

Instead of setting King Arthur's court in a romance, Chaucer forms a satirical argument by creating a narrator that is a caricature of reality, or a parody, therefore the tale narrated by the wife following the prologue is also exaggerated into a satire. It transforms from a parody in the prologue into a satire in the tale because *TWBT* challenges his audience to speculate and identify the flawed motivations of the nobility rather than creating a romance that idealizes knights like Sir Gawain in *SGGK*. The narrator, and wife, in Chaucer's *TWBP* tells a grand story about some of the affairs she had that is full of vulgar details. For example, the wife exclaims to her lover, "Ye shul have queynte right ynogh at eve!" with the Middle English word 'queynte' referring to

her female genitals (*TWBP* l. 332). The prologue, containing such sexual and humorous content, fits into the English fabliau genre. Lewis also agrees in the article *The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale'* that the prologue is a parody and that "... we ... find dramatic aspects of characterization that Chaucer later puts to such good use in his fabliaux and in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue'" (Lewis 255). In contrast to its prologue, *TWBT* does not contain vulgar details - it is more "subdued" as Reid says in *Crocodilian Humor: A Discussion of Chaucer's Wife of Bath* (Reid 82). Reid also adds that the prologue is written to simply be enjoyed as a comedy rather than anything realistic. He writes, "It seems much more likely that they have found a way of misunderstanding Chaucer," if you do not read *The Canterbury Tales*, and therefore the stories such as *TWBT* within it, as a comedy (Reid 72). However, when compared to *SGGK* and the analog of the knights of King Arthur's court, *TWBT* is commenting on the abuse of power in the royal courts, therefore it must not only be a comedy but, more specifically, a satire. In the article *Hearing Chaucer Out: The Art of Persuasion in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'*, Koban argues that the women in *TWBT* are dominant because the narrator, the wife, is a feminist based on her prologue focusing on female sovereignty in marriage (Koban 230). Koban states that the answer to what women most desire "... is the antifeminist thesis governing the Wife in both... the prologue and the tale" (Koban 327). He adds that the text shows that once women "... have won dominion in marriage women will submit to their husbands" (Koban 328). Meaning, if this text was not read as an ironic, satirical piece, *TWBT* would be an anti-feminist text. Yet, as a satirical text, *TWBT* shows how a supposedly virtuous man of nobility employs women for his own benefit. Thus, Chaucer calls his audience to

speculate the nobility rather than ignorantly believe that they are acting virtuously while also promoting feminine activism.

To strengthen satirical elements in *TWBT* Chaucer illustrates the flaws of high ranking male officials' that abuse their power through the unnamed knight's interactions with the young maiden, the Queen, and the elf who later becomes his wife. The conflict of the story begins when the knight rapes a young maiden. "He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn, / ... By verray force birafte hire maydenhed..." (*TWBT* ll. 886-888). The act of raping a woman is a major breach of the chivalric virtue of courtesy because the knight is obviously treating the maiden with ill-manner by sexually assaulting her. The knight again violates the chivalric virtue of courtesy when he is tried by Queen Guinevere. "Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh," (*TWBT* l. 913). Meaning, the knight sighed in distress in response to the Queen pardoning his sexual assault and giving him a second chance when he should have been grateful to the Queen, like Sir Gawain is to the Green Knight. It is here and in the case of sexually assaulting the maiden that Chaucer makes it clear to his audience that *TWBT* is not a typical Arthurian romance but rather a satire because in other analogs of King Arthur's court the women are treated well. "King Arthur's court ... supports a code of chivalry that follows in the general tradition of courtly love in which women are highly respected, if not worshipped" Williams writes in his article *Three Metaphors of Criticism and the 'Wife of Bath's Tale'* (Williams 147). The knight is likely not grateful for the second chance the Queen grants him because it is a challenge for him to find "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (*TWBT* l. 905) in order for him to better understand women. Instead, after finding what women want most, the knight uses the

sovereignty women desire to manipulate the elf woman that is disguised as an old hag. The knight tells his recently wedded wife/the elf:

I put me in your wise governance.

Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance

And moost honour to yow and me also.

I do no fors the wheither of the two,

For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me. (*TWBT* ll. 1231-1235).

In this scene, the knight uses what he has learned about women desiring sovereignty, the power to govern one's self, to manipulate the elf into submitting to his will. He awards her sovereignty but then she gives it up by gifting him with her transforming herself into a young, beautiful, and loyal wife - what he most desires (*TWBT* ll. 1240-1243). Later, the narrator adds, "And she obeyed hym in everthyng..." to emphasize how the elf's sovereignty was taken away by her submitting to him (*TWBT* l. 1255). If the text were not satirical, Chaucer would be suggesting that the knight has learned from his journey like Sir Gawain does, but this scene is distorted by the exaggerated narration of the wife. Therefore, the wife believes the knight has learned his lesson, but the audience does not because the knight never receives his just punishment of beheading or even confesses his shame for raping the young maiden. The wife, has failed to be sovereign as well by being unaware of how the knight is dominating the women in her tale. The knight abuses the privileges associated with his status and infringes upon the chivalric virtues knights are expected to follow by using the innocent maiden, the merciful Queen, and the loving elf only to his benefit.

Not only does the King Arthur's court analog lead Chaucer's audience to believe *TWBT* is written to be a romance similar to *SGGK*, but the societal standards of knighthood also created expectations. Knighthood in England during the Medieval Period was, supposedly, bestowed upon any man of any class if they reflected the chivalrous virtues of knights through their actions. Meaning, because the knight in *TWBT* fails to be a virtuous man that is courteous to women, Chaucer is showing how the nobility, such as knights, do not always do as they are expected. As Stroud says in the essay *Chivalric Terminology in Late Medieval Literature*, "Knighthood thus rested not on inherited privilege, but on qualities perceptible in a man's actions" (Stroud 326). He then clarifies that "... only two knights in all the Arthurian matter have backgrounds that are not purely noble" (Stroud 326). Meaning, although anyone had the ability to become a knight, it was not a common occurrence that someone not of noble lineage became a knight. Another aspect of historical context is that at the time that it was published, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was meant to be read aloud and cause a reaction from the audience. As Koban states in the previously mentioned article *Hearing Chaucer Out: The Art of Persuasion in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale'*, Chaucer wrote "... for presentation to a living audience of friends and patrons..." (Koban 225). Most scholars agree that Chaucer's poetry served as a way for him to voice his opinions he formed in his social life that, otherwise, he would be reprimanded for by his colleagues (Koban 226). This is due to Chaucer being a member of the nobility himself. Pairing the historical context of knighthood with Chaucer using his writing as a platform for what he knew as a member of the nobility, he wrote *TWBT* to persuade his audience to change the way they thought about their own culture, in this case, concerning masculinity standards and expectations that lead to the manipulation of women.

Chaucer sets *TWBT* in the Arthurian world that is usually written into the romance genre that creates expectations of a chivalrous knight. However, *TWBT* takes place in the Arthurian world with a knight that does not exemplify chivalry in his actions turning the story into a satire that exposes the flaws of the nobility. Chaucer shows how the knight uses his nobility title to manipulate the women around him. Therefore, *TWBT* is a satirical text calling Chaucer's audience to speculate nobility figures and promote feminine activism.

Works Cited

- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Tale." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Koban, Charles. "Hearing Chaucer Out: The Art of Persuasion in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1971, pp. 225–239. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25093161.
- Lewis, Robert E. "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale.'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 79, no. 3, 1982, pp. 241–255. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/437149.
- Liu, Yin. "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre." *Chaucer Review*, vol. 40, no. 4, Apr. 2006, pp. 335–353. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/cr.2006.0007.
- Reid, David S. "." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1969, pp. 73–89. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25093113.
- "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Winny, James, translator. *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Stroud, Michael. "Chivalric Terminology in Late Medieval Literature." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1976, pp. 323–334. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2708828.
- Williams, Michael E. "Three Metaphors of Criticism and the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1985, pp. 144–157. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25093949.

Bibliography

- Anderson, J. J. "The Three Judgments and the Ethos of Chivalry in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1990, pp. 337–355. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25094140.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The General Prologue." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Tale." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Eichel, Andrew. "Interpreting 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' Translation and Manipulation of Audience Expectations." *Fifteenth Century Studies*, vol. 38, 2013, pp. 41-63. *ProQuest*, <https://login.proxy.longwood.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.longwood.edu/docview/1560339543?accountid=12144>.
- Hanawalt, Barbara A. "Medieval Literacy." *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1981, pp. 367–371. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/367705.
- Koban, Charles. "Hearing Chaucer Out: The Art of Persuasion in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1971, pp. 225–239. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25093161.
- Lewis, Robert E. "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale.'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 79, no. 3, 1982, pp. 241–255. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/437149.

- Lipton, Emma. "Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2019, pp. 335–351.
- Liu, Yin. "Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre." *Chaucer Review*, vol. 40, no. 4, Apr. 2006, pp. 335–353. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/cr.2006.0007.
- Parsons, Ben. "The English Fabliau in the 15th and 16th Centuries: The English Fabliau in the 15th and 16th Centuries." *Literature Compass*, vol. 10, no. 7, 2013, pp. 544–558., doi:10.1111/lic3.12073.
- Reid, David S. "Crocodilian Humor: A Discussion of Chaucer's Wife of Bath." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1969, pp. 73–89. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25093113.
- "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Winny, James, translator. *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Broadview Press, 2015.
- Stroud, Michael. "Chivalric Terminology in Late Medieval Literature." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1976, pp. 323–334. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2708828.
- Williams, Michael E. "Three Metaphors of Criticism and the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1985, pp. 144–157. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25093949.
- Woods, William F. "Nature and the Inner Man in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2002, pp. 209–227. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25096166.