

Transformation in Chaucer's the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale'

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Abstract

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), the Wife of Bath appears "as a woman of very strong opinions who believes firmly in marriage" and as well "in the need to manage husbands strictly" (Thornley & Gwyneth 1993, p.16), and hence her story is about an Arthurian knight who rapes a maiden and has to face the consequences of his deed.

The pilgrims of Chaucer's masterpiece undergo transformations, which are chronicled in this literary text. These transformations occur in a variety of forms and take different shapes. The Wife of Bath is one of these travellers. In the following discussion, I'll look at how the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' handles metamorphosis. By reading this article, readers will realize that transformation is not limited to the one of the hag that occurs at the end of the tale.

Keywords: Chaucer, Wife of Bath, *Canterbury Tales*, transformation

1. Introduction

The 'Wife of Bath's Tale' is one of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; a touchstone of Medieval Literature. The tales are told by a group of pilgrims travelling from Southwark to Canterbury. Drawn from different levels of the English society, the pilgrims disclose a vivid picture of the English life in the fourteenth century. They have a chance to entertain themselves, and express their opinions regarding some topics as well.

Most memorable is the Wife of Bath whom Griffith (1991) sees as "a free-wheeling feminist figure" (p. 15). In his introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*, Benson, L. D. (1987) writes, "there are two transformations in the tale, that of the loathly lady and that of the knight" (p. 11). Critics and researchers usually concentrate on the two transformations mentioned by Benson. Reading the above quotation, I have found out that there are many transformations that occur in the tale. Due to the fact that there are many changes, this paper will only focus on main transformations in the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' (hereafter referred to as *WB's P&T*).

2. Discussion

Indeed, pilgrimage itself is a type of change; pilgrims leave the secular world and set out to Canterbury, a symbol of spiritual world. Regarding definition, transformation is a change that might take place in form, appearance, nature, class, behavior, situation, understanding, etc. To "transform" means, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1987), to "change the shape, appearance, quality or nature." Hence, transformation is not limited to form and appearance, but it implies the change of nature. It becomes clear that some changes are more memorable, unforgettable and conceivable like the metamorphosis of the hag, yet there are other worthy-mentioning changes that occur in the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale.'

From the very beginning of her Prologue, the Wife of Bath, the presumably submissive fourteenth-century woman, assumes the responsibilities of a really modern twenty-first-century woman through her experience by defending and claiming her rights-Coghill's translation of Chaucer is what is quoted from in this article:-

'If there were no authority on earth
Except experience, mine, for what it's worth,
And that's enough for me.... (WB's P&T, lines 1-3)

It is experience that lets her speak; she outlives her five husbands. Thus, “But I can say for certain, it’s no lie, / God bade us all to wax and multiply” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 29-30). This is not the language of a 14th c. woman; it is the language of a stubborn, straightforward woman. Indeed, “at a time when women were expected to be silent Chaucer makes her Prologue almost twice as long as her tale wherein she is able to hold the pilgrims’ undivided attention” (Lohia, 2020, p.74). She expresses herself clearly: “Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears. / I can’t keep continent for years and years” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 47-48). Hence, it is experience that changes her and gives her strength to articulate herself first and to represent her gender’s views in Chaucer’s group of pilgrims. In this respect, Nabi (2017) argues, “the Wife of Bath represents the “liberal” extreme in regards to female stereotypes of the Middle Ages ... she has a mind of her own and voices herself” (p. 63).

The Wife of Bath defends herself and explains her idea by quoting or referring to actual stories and comes to the conclusion: “In wifhood I will use my instrument / As freely as my Maker me it sent” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 153-54). The Wife is not like the maid of her tale who disappears from the tale right away after being ravished by the knight; she is able to heal and reconcile and if there is a need to use her technique and strategy to continue her life, she will not hesitate to do so.

Indeed, marriage is a kind of transformation; in a sense it is a change of the way of life that one has been used to. And hence, the Wife of Bath claims that she is the one who has a control over all her husbands while the opposite is true to her time and culture. This is a change in the concepts of that period where authority belongs to men, particularly when we learn that she represents a middle class female in a changing society; she says, “I’ll have a husband yet / Who shall be both my debtor and my slave” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 158-59). Thus, cultural norms of her society are changing, at least in her sense and understanding; the one who should be submissive turns into a powerful individual—that is the Wife of Bath. At the same time, the one who represents “the master”—that is her husband— is no more than a “slave”; a change of the social and cultural position that is not allowed at any time, not to mention the 14th century.

Another noticeable change is that while hearing her Prologue, the Pardoner, another pilgrim, interrupts her and decides, “There’ll be no marrying for me this year!” (*WB’s P&T*, line 172). If the natural known norms are changing, one should become careful. Here the Pardoner is afraid if he is going to meet and marry one like the Wife of Bath; his life will be turned over as long as the price of any marriage will be his freedom. Hence, the Wife of Bath manages to change this pilgrim’s plan and thinking.

In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath also transforms the lives of her five husbands; they become under her control and give her everything in a society that valorizes masculinity. She admits, “I made them work at night” (*WB’s P&T*, line 206), and claims, “They’d given me their treasure” (*WB’s P&T*, line 208), and “They loved me well enough” (*WB’s P&T*, line 211). Moreover, she confirms, “I managed them so well by my technique” (*WB’s P&T*, line 223). Such statements cannot be found in a society where authority and control are conferred on men. According to the Wife of Bath, her husbands are changed into different people living a different kind of life; they become under her control at a time women have no chance to resist or challenge men’s sovereignty.

Indeed, the Wife of Bath confirms that she has managed to force her husbands to consent “That in the end I always ruled the roast” (*WB’s P&T*, line 412). Moreover, she admits that she has been able to deceive her husbands: “No one can be so bold—I mean no man— / At lies and swearing as a woman can” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 231-32). What a woman the Wife of Bath is! Is it easy to upside down life in such a way? Is it possible that she is able to transform her husband into “no man” and let that creature act according to the strategy she sets forth?

Having said all this, the Wife of Bath transforms herself into one who tells the truth and does not deceive the pilgrims; “I’ll tell the truth” (*WB’s P&T*, line 199). Usually the woman who deceives her husband may deceive anybody else, but this woman is of a different type. And because there are male pilgrims, she tries to attract their attention, and keeps some authority on them in order to let them listen to her tale; this is another way of trying to hold power and authority over those males who should have the authority at that time and moment by virtue of their gender. Benson C. D. (1997) notices that the ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale’ “is much shorter than the preceding prologue but [her] voice has changed completely” (p. 102). It is a tactic to attract other pilgrims’ attention and make them listen to her tale.

Talking about her fourth husband, the Wife of Bath says, “Young, strong and stubborn, I was full of rage / And jolly...” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 463-64). Now a change takes place; she is old. In addition, she changes the life of the fourth husband; she admits, “Of jealousy and rage; he got no peace” (*WB’s P&T*, line 498). Like other husbands, “He’s in his grave” (*WB’s P&T*, line 512). Here death represents another form of change; life is not eternal and definitely everything should come to an end. So, a lot of things, including her behavior, are transformed in the life of this

woman.

Furthermore, it is the fifth husband who manages to transform the Wife of Bath to become a lover; she “took [him] for love and not for wealth” (*WB's P&T*, line 536). Hence, she adds, “I handed him the money, lands and all / That ever had been given me before” (*WB's P&T*, lines 640-41). She changes to become an individual who is ready to sacrifice for the sake of love due to the circumstances she experiences. At her advanced age, she changes her technique by providing weath for the sake of what she calls “love”.

Here the Wife of Bath becomes more lenient and prudent than usual, and this is a change of her behavior. As a result of husband's hit, she becomes deaf; “And that's the reason why I'm deaf” (*WB's P&T*, line 646). This husband's hit causes a change in the function of her ear. As a consequence of manipulating his hit and conducting her well-done tactics, she manages to change his behavior toward her right away; she says,

He gave the bridle over to my hand

Gave me the government of house and land,

Of tongue and fist, indeed of all he'd got. (*WB's P&T*, lines 823-25)

In so doing, the husband whom she has “handed him the money, lands and all” (*WB's P&T*, line 640) becomes the obedient, submissive person who, in return, gives her “all he'd got” (*WB's P&T*, line 825). In other words, she not only regains what she has given him, but also manages to control everything in his life; this is a dramatic movie-like change. Apparently, the whole matter is a game, and she is professional to play well.

Anyhow, all the examples the Wife of Bath uses in her Prologue, such as Samson, Hercules, etc. indicate some kind of transformation in a way or another. For example, Samson is transformed into an ordinary person after having his hair cut (Dohal, 2018, p. 34). All these examples show that nothing eternal in this life; life itself is experienced through changes and transformations.

After all, the Wife of Bath chooses to tell a tale that symbolizes the struggle of the sexes and tries to demonstrate what women want most through her story. The tale is about a knight who rapes a girl, and in order to save his life, he should give the answer to the question ‘What do women love most?’ An ugly old witch gives him the answer ‘to rule’ and he agrees to marry her. The tale's main topic is the metamorphosis of that hag at the end. And from the very beginning of the tale, a reader can realize the sense of this transformation when the Wife of Bath points out to the land of fairies: “This was a land brim-full of fairy folk” (*WB's P&T*, line 869). The intended land belongs to the fairies that, in turn, control and manage the play of transformation. Hence, “Chaucer uses the outlaw motif as a way to explore the possibility of change and transformation in human nature” (Gonzalez, 2020, p. 6).

Indeed, the tale starts with a transformation of the social norms used at that time when the knight in question sees a maiden and “By force he took her maidenhead” (*WB's P&T*, line 900). Indeed, “when the young knight rapes the maid, he has literally shifted her shape by means of forced entry” (Fein, 2002, p. 337). Presumably a knight is the one who defends maidenhood rather than the one who ravishes it. By taking her maidenhood, he transforms her into another kind of woman; “her virginity [is] gone, she is changed and diminished in body. He gains [momentarily] and she loses” (Fein, p. 337). He fulfills his sexual desire at the moment, but he has to face the consequences of his action. In this knight's case the judgment is unlikely given to the queen by the king: “He gave the queen the case” (*WB's P&T*, line 908); this is another transformation of authority where the queen takes the position of the king.

In addition, the king's judgment of “to lose [the knight's] head / By course of law” (*WB's P&T*, lines 903-04) is changed by the queen to be: “Yet you shall live if you can answer me: / What is the thing that women most desire?” (*WB's P&T*, lines 916-17). Hence, “feminine intervention shifts the ground away from what is a case of clear-cut crime and punishment” into what we may call “a quest to learn” (Fein, p. 337). The queen asks the knight, “What is the thing that women most desire?” (*WB's P&T*, line 917). The knight is given “A twelve month and a day” (*WB's P&T*, line 921) to come back with the answer. After his failure to find the answer for the queen's question and on his way back to King Arthur's court, the knight sees in a forest “a dance upon the leafy floor / Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more” (*WB's P&T*, lines 1003-04). But these ladies are transformed and vanished with the exception of the ‘old crone’:

But lo! Before he came to where they were,

Dancers and dance all vanished into air!

There wasn't a living creature to be seen

Save one old woman crouched upon the green. (*WB's P&T*, lines 1007-10)

Here, everything is different; Fein states:

Unlike the young maiden, whom he mistakenly took to be instantly accessible, the woman he meets now is fully marked as distant and 'other': old, ragged, foul, ugly, magically bizarre. She has control of the hapless man, instead of the other way around. His own motive has changed from pleasure-seeking to primal survival. (p. 339)

The above-mentioned fairies remind us of what is stated in the third line of the tale; it is "a land brim-full of fairy folk" (*WB's P&T*, line 869). This land of fairies indicates that "Chaucer's Wife's story is conceived upon notions of boundaries changing and shape shifting" (Fein, p. 337). Earlier in her prologue, the Wife of Bath elaborates on her five husbands who enter her boundaries and what happens to them. In the tale, she talks about a knight who, out of superiority and self-conceit, enters a maiden's body, and whose impetuous action leads him to enter the feminine court and then "the fairy realm." Of course, the change involves all parties; women and men:

The rapist-knight, by unthinking choice and penetrative act, has entered, quite literally, 'femenye', and he may now never return to a state of separated maleness.

The change is absolute, whether he knows it or not. (Fein, p. 340)

We know that women and men need each other; out of unawareness, the immature knight thinks that he can overpower the maid. Entering her world means that the knight needs that 'other' body to satisfy his natural needs. Then, he enters the queen's court to start his quest for survival; he needs the queen to solve his problem for no one else will consider his case. After that, he goes across the fairy land because he needs their help. Hence, by entering the world of "the Other" (*The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, p. 620) the knight has no choice to return back to his own world unless he is permitted to do so. Indeed, there is no way to go back; he has passed through a transformation he has to adjust himself to.

Entering the land of fairies, the knight meets the 'other' crone. After hearing the knight's story, the old hag guarantees that his "life is safe" (*WB's P&T*, line 1027). And this is another transformation; he is "as good as dead" (*WB's P&T*, line 1018), and this hag, who belongs to the world of the "other" gender, restores his hope of living. Yet, knowing the answer does not mean that the knight is completely free of any consequences of entering the women's world; he should pay back for his mistake.

Answering the question and being given his life give the hag the right later to claim and become his wife; an end he has not expected. Indeed, the knight believes that marrying her will transform his rank into a lower social one and bring shame to his family: "Alas that any of my race and station / Should ever make so foul a misalliance!" (*WB's P&T*, lines 1080-81). He appears to be proud of his gentle birth in spite of the crime he has committed. He knows that by this marriage "his noble line will die. Just as loss of virginity erased the maid, so too will a low marriage erase the aristocrat" (Fein, p. 340). Definitely, this marriage will lead to a transformation of his social rank. Unfortunately, he has to marry this hag who reminds him later:

I am your own beloved and your wife,

And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;

And certainly I never did you wrong. (*WB's P&T*, lines 1103-05)

He has promised to fulfill what she requires him to do; this is gentility, not being proud of something he has not done. She manages to convince him that gentility is really "a matter of deeds" (Benson L. D., p. 11). She points out that "Gentle is he that does a gentle deed" (*WB's P&T*, line 1182), and being born of a gentle house has nothing to do with nobility and gentility. Choosing to live with this hag means that he understands the hag's concept of gentility; this is a transformation of his understanding. Here Amos (2019) calls attention to reconsidering "the binaries: the rapist becomes the raped, [and] the hunter becomes the hunted" (p. 39); this is the transformation. The knight addresses her with respect, "My lady and my love, my dearest wife / I leave the matter to your wise decision" (*WB's P&T*, lines 1242-43). In a masculine culture, the hag is able to transform the knight's behavior toward her as a female and make him yield to her sovereignty. This long-processed change lets him recognize and consequently accept his condition. As human beings, we have to recognize our communal needs and put them in their context.

After winning “the mastery” “to choose and rule” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 1248-49), the hag transforms herself and becomes “young and lovely, rich in charms” (*WB’s P&T*, line 1263). In the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, “women are not only transformed into equal partners, but ones with further mastery over men” (Johnson, 2016, p. 54). It is magic, not anything else, which leads to reconciliation among opponents in this tale. In fact, the reality of our world is different and difficult to manage, but Chaucer, through the *Wife of Bath*, resorts to this magic-like and historically far-distant tale as a way to reconcile with the real world of the maleness.

Finally, sorrow and unhappiness that prevail before the wedding transforms into happiness and joy at the end; “So they lived ever after to the end / In perfect bliss” (*WB’s P&T*, lines 1269-70). Vaněčková (2007) rationalizes this happy end as follows: “The female principle wants to change the man, reeducate him rather than eliminate him as a threat” (p. 42). Indeed, happiness is the ultimate goal that people seek in their life, and this end takes us back to the purpose of telling these tales, i. e. to pass time, and entertain other pilgrims. It is a means to overcome the hardships and miseries one may find in such a trip.

3. Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer’s the ‘*Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*’ include many transformations that take different forms. The most unforgettable transformation in the tale is that of the hag into a beautiful wife. Also the *Wife of Bath’s* gain of sovereignty and control over her husbands are memorable, particularly in a patriarchal society where women are denied a lot of their rights. She elucidates for her listeners, intended men, what women look for in their relationship with men; it is sovereignty over men more than anything else, and this is what she presents in her Prologue and later in her tale. In both, the *Wife of Bath* draws up a message for men to understand, respect and value the other gender. The Arthurian knight of her tale becomes aware of his milieu and changes his behavior towards the hag as a woman and submits to her authority.

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