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SOVEREIGNTY AND THE LOATHLY LADY IN ENGLISH, WELSH AND IRISH

By J.K. Bollard

There are a number of tales in early English, French, Irish, and Welsh in which a female character remarkable primarily for her hideous appearance and amorous demands plays a significant part. The various narratives in which this motif of the Loathly Lady turns up have been seen as bearing a somewhat complex relationship to one another, largely because the basic assumption is made, whether or not it is stated explicitly, that there must be some formal and presumably discernible connection between tales containing similar episodes. This paper will review briefly the occurrence of the Loathly Lady motif in several sources with particular attention to the thematic function of that motif in each tale and to the differences of treatment in the various versions. While similarities found among a number of texts are, of course, important in any comparative study, a close scrutiny of the structural and thematic differences is crucial to an understanding of the relationship those tales have to one another. Quite simply, it is the nature and extent of the differences which set a limit on the degree of closeness that we can postulate between two tales or episodes. This paper is primarily concerned with these differences and aims to illustrate them by addressing two topics: one is the nature of *flaithius* or "sovereignty" in Irish texts and its relationship to the concept of sovereignty in Middle English tales; the other is a comparative review of the English poems in the light of the Celtic material containing Loathly Lady episodes or incidents.

* * *

Because it occurs in tales told by John Gower in *Confessio Amantis* (*The Tale of Florent*) and Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (*The Wife of Bath's Tale*),¹ the motif of the Loathly Lady has received a good deal of critical attention, most notably from G.H. Maynardier and Sigmund Eisner.² There are obvious parallels between several medieval Irish tales on the one hand and several Middle English tales on the other in which a loathly lady is transformed into a beautiful maiden. For those interested in demonstrating the transmission and development of a tale from an earlier source the problem becomes how to account for the linguistic, cultural, geographic, chronological, and stylistic gaps between these two ends of a supposed continuum. Eisner suggests an itinerary from Ireland through Wales to Breton *conteurs*, thence to France and finally England. While this is consistent with the widely accepted theory

of the transmission of Arthurian stories (modified by Constance Bullock-Davies's monograph³ on the possible transmission by latimers directly from Welsh to Norman), in the case of the transformed hag motif we are lacking the Welsh evidence on which this theory of transmission depends. As F.N. Robinson points out in his edition of the works of Chaucer, there are considerable gaps between the Irish and the English tales:

The close connexion of Chaucer's tale with the Irish has hardly been proved, though a Celtic, and specifically Irish, derivation for the English group remains a reasonable theory. The possibility of a French intermediary - such as the lost French "lai breton" assumed long ago by Gaston Paris . . . - must also still be recognized.⁴

Thus, let us turn first to a review of the existing French and Welsh tales which have been proposed as intermediaries between the Irish and the English tales of sovereignty.

In her comparison of the Welsh *Peredur* with Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, Glenys Goetinck is perhaps right in saying that "the fact that the Black Maiden and the Damoisele Hideuse are not alike, feature for feature, is of no great importance for the episode as a whole".⁵ However, such differences can be significant in a comparison of two or more analogues, especially if the comparative method such as is favoured by Goetinck is used to suggest origins and sources for traditional features of medieval narrative. Goetinck argues that the use of animal features by Chrétien and by Wolfram von Eschenbach in *Parzival* in describing the loathly lady detracts from the total effect by introducing elements of familiarity and humour.⁶ She goes on to suggest that in the description in *Peredur*, "the maiden remains a hideous travesty of the human form whom the author has successfully kept apart from man and beast, an unmistakable denizen of the Otherworld whose unlovely appearance bodes ill for those she seeks".⁷ This seems to be overstating the case considerably for there can be little doubt that a strong element of humour is also intended in the Welsh description of the *Morwyn Du* "Black Maiden", as in most (if not all) descriptions of the loathly lady:

Ac ar hynny wynt a welynt yn dyfot y mywn morwyn bengrych du ar gefyn mul melyn. A charreieu anuanawl yn y llaw yn gyrru y mul. A phryt anuanawl agharueid arnei. Duach oed y hwyneb ae dwylaw nor hayarn duhaf a darffei y bygu. Ac nyt y lliw hacraf, namyn y llun. Grudyeu aruchel ac wyneb kryccir y waeret. A thrwyn byr ffroenuoll. Ar neill lygat yn vrithlas thratheryll. Ar llall yn du val y muchyd ygheuhynt y phen. Danhed hiryon melynion melynach no blodeu y banadyl. Ae chroth yn kychwynnu o gledyr y dwyvron yn uch noe helgeth. Asgwrn y chefyn oed ar weith bagyl. Y dwy glun oed yn llydan yscyrnic. Ac yn vein oll o hynny y waeret. eithyr y traet ar glineu oed vras.

[And thereupon they could see coming in a black curly-headed maiden on a yellow mule, and rough thongs in her hand, urging on the mule; and a rough unlovely look about her. Blacker were her face and her hands than the blackest iron that had been steeped in pitch; and it was not her colour that was ugliest, but her shape: high cheeks and hanging, baggy-fleshed face, and a stub wide-nostrilled nose, and the one eye mottled green, most piercing, and the other black, like jet, deep sunk in her head. Long yellow teeth, yellower than the flowers of the broom, and her belly swelling from her breastbone higher than her chin. Her backbone was shaped like a crutch; her two hips were broad in the bone, but everything narrow thence downwards, save that her feet and knees were clumped.]⁸

The element of humour becomes even more apparent when we see that the author is here parodying the traditional Welsh narrative devices for describing beauty. For instance, the use of *blodeu y banadyl* "flowers of the broom" appears in the description of Olwen in the early Arthurian story of *Culhwch and Olwen*⁹ to evoke the ideal yellow of Olwen's hair, not her teeth: this must surely be a traditional feature parodied in *Peredur* for its humorous effect and striking incongruity.

One of the arguments R.S. Loomis uses for identifying the *Morwyn Du* with characters representing the sovereignty or kingship of Ireland in early Irish literature is that, in his opinion, "the description in *Peredur* . . . tallies in feature after feature with the description of the Sovranty of Erin in *The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon*".¹⁰ However, we must point out here that these two descriptions match no more closely than most descriptions of the loathly lady. The Irish version in question is as follows:

Is amlaid bui in caillech, co mba duibithir gual
cech n-alt 7 cach n-aigi di o mullach co talmain. Ba
samalta fri herboll fiadeich in mong glas gaisidech bai
tria cleithi a cheandmullaich. Consealgad glasgeg
darach fo brith dia corran glaisfiacla bai 'na cind co
roichead a hou. Suli duba dethaighe le, sron cham
chuasach. Medon fethech brecbaindech ingalair le, 7
luirgni fiara fochama siad, adbronnach
leathansluaistech si, glunmar glaisingnech. Ba grain
tra a tuarascbail na cailligi.

[Thus was the hag: every joint and limb of her, from the top of her head to the earth, was as black as coal. Like the tail of a wild horse was the gray bristly mane that came through the upper part of her head-crown. The green branch of an oak in bearing would be severed by the sickle of green teeth that lay in her head and reached to her ears. Dark smoky eyes she had: a nose crooked and hollow. She had a middle fibrous, spotted with pustules, diseased, and shins

distorted and awry. Her ankles were thick, her shoulderblades were broad, her knees were big, and her nails were green. Loathsome in sooth was the hag's appearance.]¹¹

A description certainly not directly related, but as close as any other, to that in *Peredur* can be found in Ovid's personification of Famine in *Metamorphoses*:

quaesitamque Famen lapidoso vidit in agro
 unguibus et raras vellentem dentibus herbas.
 hirtus erat crinis, cava lumina, pallor in ore,
 labra incana situ, scabrae rubigine fauces,
 dura cutis, per quam spectari viscera possent;
 ossa sub incurvis exstabant arida lumbis,
 ventris erat pro ventre locus; pendere putares
 pectus et a spinae tantummodo crate teneri.
 auxerat articulos macies, genuumque tumberat
 orbis, et inmodico prodibant tubere tali.

[She went to look for Hunger, whom she found in a stony field, tearing up a few scant grasses with her nails and teeth. The creature's face was colourless, hollow-eyed, her hair uncared for, her lips bleached and cracked. Scabrous sores encrusted her throat, her skin was hard and transparent, revealing her inner organs. The brittle bones stuck out beneath her hollow loins, and instead of a stomach she had only a place for one. Her breast, hanging loose, looked as if it were held in position only by the framework of her spine. Her joints seemed large in contrast to her skinny limbs, the curve of her knees made a real swelling, and her ankle-bones formed protuberances that were all out of proportion.]¹²

If we are not, indeed, dealing with a descriptive *topos*, this classical analogue should at least serve as a warning against placing too much reliance on the mere existence of analogues in trying to trace the origins of a tale or group of tales; the earliest analogue is not necessarily a direct source or even an indirect influence.

This is not to say that there is no connection between the various transformed hags and representatives of sovereignty which abound in Celtic and Middle English literature. However, unless like Goetinck we rely on ingenious reconstructions of a hypothetical original far removed from the themes and structure of the existing tale, we are not dealing directly in *Peredur* with themes of sovereignty and transformation. On the contrary, *Peredur*, like *Perceval*, is clearly a courtly romance not at all out of place in the twelfth century, dealing largely as it does with questions of chivalry and courtesy. The most striking difference between *Peredur* and *Perceval* on the one hand and the Irish and English tales we will be examining below on the other is that there is no readily apparent

transformation motif in the Welsh and French romances. The loathly lady in these tales comes to rebuke the hero rather than to test him with a demand for a kiss or even more intimate contact. Unfortunately, Chrétien's *Perceval* is an unfinished work and we do not and cannot know whether the hero was to meet La Damoisele Hideuse later in the story. In *Peredur* he does meet the Morwyn Du in a later episode.¹³ It may be significant that analogues to this episode in the Welsh tale appear in the *Second Continuation* to Chrétien's poem and in the so-called *Didot Perceval*.¹⁴ In these two French tales, however, the female character whose role corresponds to that of the Morwyn Du is not ugly. On the contrary, she is quite beautiful and Perceval undertakes the hunt of a white stag in hopes of winning her love. In *Peredur* the Morwyn Du causes additional problems for the hero, not least by tricking him (for obscure reasons) into killing a precious unicorn, a feat for which he is severely censured by another (more beautiful) female character. If the disparity between the French and the Welsh tales in this episode indicates that the transformation theme may have once been part of the tale it is certainly not a significant factor in the surviving texts. A certain amount of shapeshifting does take place elsewhere in *Peredur*, for very near the end of the story we find that a male cousin of Peredur confesses to being not only the Morwyn Du but also several other characters who have appeared in the course of Peredur's adventures. This, however, hardly provides a precise parallel to the transformation motif as it is used elsewhere.

The case, then, for citing the appearance of a loathly lady in *Peredur* and in various French tales of Perceval as intermediary in the development of a theme from Irish to Middle English is not very well supported. The transformation is not a significant development in these tales; the loathly lady does not demand the favours of the hero, nor does she announce his eventual attainment of kingship as in the Irish tales or deliver him from a sentence of death as in the English romances. This leaves us with the description of a loathly lady as the predominant common feature, and the occurrence of a similar description in the poetry of Ovid casts considerable doubt on the uniquely Celtic origin of this feature¹⁵ as well as warning us against using a single detail as evidence for the transmission of a complex story motif from Irish to English. This does not, of course, mean that the story may not have passed this way, via links no longer extant, but theories of transmission should also take into account the different ways the motif is used on either side of the hypothetical Welsh link, and it is to these differences that we now turn.

* * *

The Irish and English tales in which a loathly lady appears fall into two distinct groups. In the Irish stories the hero (or his descendants) wins the kingship of Ireland, and in the English romances the hero marries the loathly lady and grants her sovereignty in their marriage. It is rather unfortunate that the English word "sovereignty" has come to be regarded as the natural translation for

the Irish *flaithius*. Though the difference in the nature of sovereignty in these two groups of tales is often remarked upon in general terms, one suspects nevertheless that critics who undertake a comparative study of them and who must rely on English translations of the Irish stories may be influenced somewhat by the use of this English word. *Flaithius* and *flaithemnas* are both derived from *flaith*, cognate with Welsh *gwlad* "country". These three Irish terms share, to a great extent, the same range of senses, covering the abstract "rule, sovereignty", and the concrete "kingdom, realm (especially the kingdom of Heaven)", much the same as "dominion" in English. *Flaith* is also applied to persons, giving the additional sense of "ruler, prince".¹⁶ The Irish tales of the transformed hag who identifies herself as *in Flaithius* (*in* is the definite article) use the word in a sense which maintains its connection with the etymological sense, for the woman represents the rule of Ireland and she prophesies that the hero will become king. Thus, union with *in Flaithius* may be an echo of the Irish *banais righi*, "wedding feast of kingship", the inauguration ceremony uniting the King with his land.¹⁷ The allegorical nature of the character is commented on by the woman herself in the fourteenth-century version of *The Adventures of the sons of Eochaid Mugmedon* in the Yellow Book of Lecan:

Acus amail adcondarcas misi co granna cond
aduathmar artús 7 alaind fadeoid, is amlaid sin in
flaithius, uair is annam fogabar he cen chatha 7 cen
chongala, alaind maisech immorro ria nech e fodeoid.

[And as thou hast seen me loathsome, bestial,
horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the
sovranty; for seldom it is gained without battles
and conflicts; but at last to anyone it is good
and beautiful.]¹⁸

Of course, we have no assurance that this allegorical explanation is not a late interpolation into the tale, for it is not found similarly expressed in other related Irish sources; rather the allegory (if such it is) is left implicit.

On the other hand, English *sovereignty*, borrowed from Old French and derived ultimately from Latin *super*, implies a more abstract supremacy, and it is in that sense that the English word is first recorded in the *English Prose Treatises* of Richard Rolle of Hampole, dated c.1340: "Þe ende and þe soueraynte of perfeccione".¹⁹ The next record in OED is in Chaucer's *Troilus* (III.171) where it has the sense appropriate to its use in the English tales of the transformed hag, defined in OED as "2. Supremacy in respect of power, domination, or rank; supreme domination, authority or rule". The more specific sense of "3. The position, rank or power of a supreme ruler or monarch; royal authority or dominion" also appears in the late fourteenth century.

In the English tales of the transformed hag in which the term *sovereignty* is used it is not connected directly with the transformation. Rather it is connected with the separate motif of the

question test and the difficult choice which the hero's ugly or transformed bride later confronts him with. Laura Sumner states that

. . . it must be admitted that there is a difference in the purpose of *sovereignty* in the two stories; in the Irish it represents kingly authority; in the English it is used in a somewhat humorous sense to show the advantage of a husband's complete submission to his wife.²⁰

However, it may be best to go a step further and point out that we do not appear to be dealing with a single concept - sovereignty - used for different purposes in the two groups of tales: it is perhaps closer to the mark to state that we are dealing with two entirely distinct motifs - *flaithius*, and sovereignty in marriage. Let us turn to the texts to see how these motifs manifest themselves.

The adventures of the sons of Daire recounted in *Cóir Anmann* and in the *Metrical Dindschenchas*²¹ are similar in outline though there is considerable variation in detail and at least one significant difference in motivation. Because of the prophecy that his son Lugaid would become king, Daire gave all of his sons this name. A druid informed Daire that the son who captured a golden fawn would become king. The youths set out on the hunt and the fawn is captured in the *Cóir Anmann* version by Lugaid Mac Niad and in the *Dindschenchas* by all four brothers. Here the two versions begin to differ, for in the former the brothers go one at a time in search of shelter and encounter a hag who offers shelter if the youth will sleep with her. Lugaid Mac Niad consents, after which (transformed into a beautiful woman) she tells him:

"Missi in flaithius 7 gébhthar rige nErenn."

["I am the *flaithius* and it is the kingship of Ireland that will be taken."] ²²

In the *Dindschenchas* version a hag appears to the brothers who are already in a house and she is described in some detail. Unlike other versions of the tale, she threatens them:

Atbert-si friu, aithesc n-olc,
"Fóed nech úaib lemm innocht,
nó eter choin is duine ndron
roforníss uili m' óenor."

[She addressed them with an evil saying: "One of you must sleep with me tonight, or I will devour you all, unaided, hound and strong man alike."] ²³

Thus, the motivation to comply with her request is more compelling in this version, and as a consequence this may lessen somewhat the courtesy of Lugaid when he offers to sleep with her. However, the

author stresses Lugaid's humility in his speech, and this is perhaps emphasized further by Lugaid's echo of the hag's words:

"Faífet-se léi, is lesc in cor:
lór duíb m' esbaid-se m' óenor."

["I will sleep with her - unwelcome task: enough for you to lose me only."] ²⁴

The phrase *is lesc in cor*, "unwelcome task", or more literally "reluctant is the pledge (or obligation)", certainly indicates that he is not very enthusiastic about the prospect. The following phrase strongly suggests that he expects to die in the course of fulfilling his pledge.

Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin is not simply an account of how Niall Noegiallach becomes king. It is the story of the attempts of Mongfind, the mother of his half-brothers, to prevent him from becoming king, and Niall's encounter with the *Flaithius* comes at the end of a series of such attempts by Mongfind, all unsuccessful, which began even before he was born. When he meets the hag Niall is not only willing to grant her the kiss she asks, he even offers unbidden to lie with her:

Laigfead lat la taeb poici do thabairt fri taeb.
Tairnid fuirri iarsin 7 dobeir poic di.

["Besides giving thee a kiss, I will lie with thee!" Then he throws himself down upon her and gives her a kiss.] ²⁵

In these Irish tales the hero who is to become king is tested for certain qualities which we might characterize as courtesy and humility, and perhaps also for the ability to recognize that things may not always be what they seem. By implication, therefore, these qualities are also desirable in a king; the result in each case is that the hero gains the kingship (*ríge*, *flaithius*) of Ireland. It is in this sense that it is significant for the hero to submit to the will of *in Flaithius* in the person of the ugly hag.

* * *

Testing also plays a part, though not the same part, in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *Gower's Tale of Florent* and the mid-fifteenth-century romance *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, in all of which the story of the transformed hag is fitted into a narrative structure markedly different from that of the Irish tales discussed above. Of these three, the versions by Chaucer and Gower are structurally similar, while *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen* is matched fairly closely, as far as the narrative is concerned, by the (incomplete) ballad *The Marriage of Gawain* in the Percy Folio, composed perhaps in the fifteenth century. ²⁶ In the Irish tales the episode of the transformed hag is the culmination of each story.

In the English poems, however, the transformation, though it plays a central role, is not the culmination of the action. Nor is this motif independent of other elements. In general terms the English poems contain four interlacing elements: (1) the question test, (2) the promise to marry the hag, (3) the transformation, and (4) the granting to her of sovereignty in marriage.

There are differences, of course, in the interrelation of these elements in each of these tales. *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen* and *The Marriage of Gawain* are both structurally and thematically more complex than the other two tales in that Arthur undergoes the question test and promises that Gawain will marry the hag. The major differences in the four main elements may be outlined as follows:

(1) *The Question Test*

In *Florent* the hero is captured by the family of a knight named Branchus whom Florent has slain in battle. Branchus's grandmother devises the question test as a bargain for Florent's life in the hopes and expectation that he will fail the test, allowing them to put him to death

Thurgh strengthe of verray covenant
Withoute blame of eny wiht. (I, 1450-1)²⁷

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* a knight of Arthur's court is condemned to death for the crime of rape, but

. . . the queene and othere ladyes mo
So longe preyeden the kyng of grace,
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,
To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille.
(894-8)²⁸

The inclusion of the rape incident in Chaucer's version of this tale has occasioned some comment and speculation. Eisner²⁹ examines three possibilities; first, that Chaucer invented the incident. This Eisner rejects (perhaps a little too off-handedly) on the basis that "Chaucer's genius lay not in creating incidents but in shaping incidents already known to him" (p.51). Second, that Chaucer borrowed the incident from an unrelated source. George R. Coffman has argued that the rape incident may have been borrowed from the Latin *Life of St. Cuthbert* containing a similar incident which, both in Latin and in a fifteenth-century English translation, contains some wording similar to that of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.³⁰ The third possibility is the one Eisner prefers: that "Chaucer included the rape because it was part of the story before he came to it" (p.54). To support this belief he draws upon the rape incident in the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*, in which Gawain fathers Libeaus Desconus, as well as drawing parallels with versions of the later ballad of *The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter*. He concludes that "there was a traditional story of a rape, that its hero was Gawain, and that the story was assimilated

into the Arthurian loathly lady tradition".³¹ However, this theory is complicated by the suggestion that Chaucer then departed somewhat from this tradition by taking his wording from the *Life of St. Cuthbert*. A further problem arises when we note that the rape incident itself is not integrated into the action of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* except as the initial motivation for the plot.

However, if we consider the context of this incident in a wider sense, we can begin to see why it may have been included in this tale. In all the English versions the question to which the hero has to seek the answer is the same (what is it that women most desire?) and in all of them the situation finally centres upon the particular case of the granting of sovereignty in marriage to the woman. Such, too, is the chief thrust of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, as exemplified in her account of her marriage to Jankyn, which concludes:

"And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
By maistrise, al the soveraynetee,
And that he seyde, 'Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat' -
After that day we hadden never debaat." (817-22)

The rape incident in the tale sets the stage for another demonstration of sovereignty in marriage, for the king grants to the queen and her ladies the choice of saving or killing the condemned knight (894-8). The thematic parallelism between this incident, the prologue to the tale, and later parts of the tale itself suggests that Chaucer may have included the rape incident, perhaps borrowed from other sources, in order to create a situation at the court itself in which the hero's life is in the hands of women, thus allowing for this appearance of the sovereignty theme at the beginning of the tale as well as at the end. This not only gives further structural balance to the tale, it is consistent with Dame Alice's overriding concern with marital sovereignty. Whereas the other versions of the story have more or less thematically unrelated opening incidents, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* deals throughout with the question of sovereignty.

Chaucer's choice of rape as the crime for which the hero is condemned is thus appropriate to his version of the story in that rape can be seen as the antithesis of female sovereignty in marriage. This, however, raises the question of why the women ask for the case to be turned over to them. A close reading of the relevant passages reveals no motive made explicit by Chaucer but, especially in the light of the motivation made clear in Gower's *Tale of Florent*, there is no reason for us to assume that the women either hoped or expected that the knight would successfully answer the question. They may have expected, as did Branchus's grandmother, that the knight would inevitably fail, thus giving them the right to avenge the unchivalrous crime against one of their own sex.³²

As noted above, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen* and *The Marriage of Gawain* are complicated by the fact that it is Arthur who must pass the question test in ransom for his life whereas Gawain must promise

to marry the loathly lady who can provide the answer to the question. The added complexity affects theme as well as narrative. In the beginning of the *Weddyng*e some stress is laid on the importance of keeping one's promise, as in Arthur's reply to Sir Gromer Somer's warning to keep their meeting secret and not to fail to return in a year's time:

"Nay," sayd kyng Arthure, "that may nott be,
Vntrewe kynghte shalt thou neuere fynde me;
To dye yett were me lever.
Ffarwelle, Sir knyghte and evylle mett,
I wolle com, and I be on lyve att the day sett,
Thoughe I shold scape neuere." (115-20)³³

Upon Arthur's return to the court Gawain notes the king's despondency and asks him the cause. When Arthur declares that he cannot tell Gawain because of his promise, Gawain assures him that he will keep the king's secret:

"[He] charygd me I shold hym nott bewrayne,
Hys counnelle must I kepe therefore,
Or els I am forswore."
"Nay, drede you nott, lord, by Mary flower,
I am nott that man that wold you dishonour,
Nother by euyn ne by moron." (146-51)

This satisfies the king, who straightway tells Gawain his tale.

Gawain's role in the romance is complex and is not restricted to his traditional one of the king's confidant. Sir Gromer Somer's complaint against Arthur is that the king granted to Gawain lands belonging to Sir Gromer (58-9); Dame Ragnell will only give Arthur the answer he is seeking to Sir Gromer Somer's question if she is given Gawain's hand in marriage. When Arthur concludes his tale to Gawain he remarks, "Alas! my worshypp therfor is nowe gone" (162). Worship is again mentioned by Gawain when he freely agrees to marry Ragnell:

"Ys this alle?" then sayd Gawen,
"I shalle wed her and wed her agayn,
.....
For ye are my kyng with honour,
And haue worshypt me in many a stowre,
Therfor shalle I nott lett;
To saue your lyfe, lorde, itt were my parte,
Or were I false and a greatt coward,
And my worshypp is the bett." (342-3; 348-53)

In thanks Arthur replies,

"My worshypp and my lyf thou savest for-euere
Therefore my loue shalle nott from the dysseyvre."
(375-6)

The theme of worship is later brought out in the pre-nuptial conversation between the queen and Ragnell (583, 585) when Gawain is given the choice of having Ragnell fair by day or night (666, 672), and when Gawain gives the choice back to her (687). Thus the theme of reputation and personal honour runs throughout the poem. By giving the question test to Arthur and the tests of loyalty and courtesy to Gawain the author is able to emphasize, especially through the use of conversation, the thematic parallels and developments in the tale. This thematic balance is even echoed in the explicit to the tale:

Here endythe the weddyng of
Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle
For helpyng of kyng Arthoure. (853-5)

The Marriage of Gawain follows the main structural outline of the *Weddyng*, as far as we can tell, for the text is fragmentary. The tone, however, is somewhat lighter and more humorous. Unfortunately, the greater part of the meeting between Arthur and the baron corresponding to Sir Gromer is missing, although the king's account to Gawain has preserved at least the outline of events for us. The portrayal of Arthur is much more satiric than in the romance. Whereas in the romance the king is encountered weaponless, in the ballad it would appear that he refuses to fight with the baron out of fear, among other motives:

- 10 "And he asked me wether I wold fight
 Or from him I shold begone,
 O[r] else I must him a ransome pay,
 And soe depart him from.
- 11 "To fight with him I saw noe cause;
 Methought it was not meet;
 for he was stiffe and strong with-all,
 His strokes were nothing sweet."

While this version preserves the narrative outline of the story, the thematic implications, for the most part, have disappeared.

(2) *The Promise to Marry the Hag*

A significant difference between the Irish and the English transformation tales is that in the latter a promise to marry the hag is interposed between the first meeting of the hero with the woman and the kiss or acquiescence which brings about the transformation. A prominent feature of the versions by both Gower and Chaucer is the hero's reluctance to marry the ugly woman. Gower relates the progress of Florent's thinking as he debates with himself what to do:

He wot noght what is best to sein,
And thoghte, as he rod to and fro,
That chese he mot on of the tuo,
Or forto take hire to his wif

Or elles forto lese his lif.
 And thanne he caste his avantage,
 That sche was of so gret an age,
 That sche mai live bot a while,
 And thoghte put hire in an Ile,
 Wher that noman hire scholde knowe,
 Til sche with deth were overthrowe. (I, 1570-80)

Like Florent, the hero of Chaucer's tale offers the woman his wealth: "Taak al my good, and lat my body go" (1061). We have suggested above that Chaucer adapted the opening incident in the tale in order that the significant action might take place in the court, and the same is true in this incident. In other versions the woman's request for marriage is made when the hero first meets her, but in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* she merely extracts from him the promise to grant her first request. It is not until the hero succeeds in the question test that she reveals her request, and the point is made that she does so in front of all:

"Bifore the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght,"
 Quod she, "that thou me take unto thy wyf;
 For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf.
 If I seye fals, sey nay, upon thy fey!"
 Thys knyght answerde, "Allas! and welaway!" (1054-8)

In contrast to these two versions, in the *Weddyng*, as we have seen, the hero repeatedly expresses his willingness to marry the woman in order to help Arthur. Gawain's speech is courteous throughout and when the time comes he does not demur. Again the theme of keeping promises is stressed. First Ragnell says to Arthur,

"Nowe hold that ye haue hyghte.
 Syn I haue sauyd your lyf, and none other,
 Gawen must me wed, Sir Arthoure,
 That is a fulle gentille knyghte."
 "No, lady, that I you hyghte I shalle nott fayle."
 (499-503)

Similar wording is used when Gawain appears for the wedding:

"Syr, I am redy of that I you hyghte,
 Alle forwardes to fulfyllle." (534-5)

Even Dame Ragnell comments on Gawain's attitude in lines that can be seen as somewhat ironic when we know the outcome of the story:

"Godhauemercy," sayd Dame Ragnell then,
 "Ffor thy sake I wold I were a fayre woman,
 Ffor thou art of so good wylle." (536-8)

Unfortunately, the corresponding portions of *The Marriage of Gawain* are missing. However, there may be a hint of Gawain's attitude in his reply to Kay's mocking of the lady:

36 "Peace, cozen Kay," then said Sir Gawaine,
 "Amend thee of thy life;
 For there is a knight amongst vs all
 That must marry her to his wife."

(3) *The Transformation*

There are also significant differences to be seen in the transformation of the hag into a beautiful young woman. In *The Tale of Florent* the hero is reluctant even to look at his new wife, and he turns himself from her in bed. The transformation takes place when Florent remembers his marriage vow and accepts the wedding bond, though primarily as a penance:

Bot evere in on sche spak and preide,
 And bad him thenke on that he seide,
 Whan that he tok hire by the hond.
 He herde and understod the bond,
 How he was set to his penance,
 And as it were a man in trance
 He torneth him al sodeinly,
 And syh a lady lay him by
 Of eyhtetiene wynter age. (I, 1795-1803)

In three of the four tales we are examining the transformation takes place when, as in the passage above, the knight brings himself to engage in love play with the woman, who then gives him the choice of having her fair by day or night. After he gives the choice back to her we learn that she had been magically transformed into hideous shape and that this granting of sovereignty to her accomplishes the final disenchantment. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, however, we can again see evidence of Chaucer's hand restructuring the tale, for only in this version does the transformation take place *after* the knight grants his wife sovereignty. His courtesy and his acquiescence to her will are both stressed and they stand out more clearly than in other versions, for the knight has seen the lady only in her ugly form when he says,

"My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
 I put me in youre wise governance;
 Cheseth youreself which be moost plesance,
 And moost honour to yow and me also." (1230-3)

Also unique to Chaucer's tale is the fact that the lady herself has control over her form, as is suggested even at the beginning of her sermon on *gentilesse*:

"Nowe, sire," quod she, "I koude amende al this,
 If that me liste, er it were dayes thre,
 So wel ye myghte here yow unto me." (1106-8)

Thus, in this version of the story the events connected with the transformation are more clearly presented as a test of the hero, with no previously unmentioned enchantment introduced which may

distract the reader or listener from the main theme of sovereignty reiterated throughout *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. Testing, as we have seen, is also a feature of the Irish tales, but the greater prominence of this element in Chaucer's version should not be used as evidence for a close link between them; testing, like loathly ladies, is far too common a romance motif to be significant in itself, and as we have seen, Chaucer's skill is visible elsewhere in emphasising the thematic content of his material.

In the *Weddyng* the hero's courtesy is maintained even up to the moment of the transformation; like Niall in *Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin* Gawain offers more than just a kiss:

"A, Sir Gawen, syn I haue you wed,
 Shewe me your cortesy in bed,
 Withe ryghte itt may nott be denyed.

 Yett for Arthours sake kysse me att the leste,
 I pray you do this att my request,
 Lett se howe ye can spede."
 Sir Gawen sayd, "I wolde do more
 Then for to kysse, and God before!"
 He turnyd hym her vntille;
 He sawe her the fayrest creature,
 That euere he sawe withoute mesure. (629-31; 635-42)

The transformation is missing in *The Marriage of Gawain*, though the passage recounting the subsequent discussion and Gawain's choice has, fortunately, survived (40-5).

(4) *The Granting of Sovereignty*

As we have mentioned above, in three of these four tales the granting of sovereignty breaks a spell which the woman's stepmother cast upon her. In Chaucer's tale, on the other hand, the implication is that the woman rewards the knight for giving her the *maistríe* (1236). However, Dame Alice makes it clear that, while she believes that women should have sovereignty in marriage, that power should not be abused. The knight's wife, having gained sovereignty and rewarded the knight with her promise to be "bothe faire and good" (1241), of her own free choice then grants him her obedience:

"I prey to God that I moote sterven wood,
 But I to you be also good and trewe
 As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe.
 And but I be to-morn as fair to seene
 As any lady, emperice, or queene,
 That is betwixe the est and eke the west,
 Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest."

 A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
 And she obeyed hym in every thyng
 That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng. (1242-8; 1254-6)

Thus, the Wife of Bath is interested in sovereignty not for its own sake, but in order to achieve a happy and secure marriage. The ending of her tale is couched in much the same terms as the end of her account of gaining sovereignty over her husband Jankyn:

"After that day we hadden never debaat.
 God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
 As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
 And also trewe, and so was he to me." (822-5)

* * *

This review of selected elements of these four English tales proves instructive in two ways. First of all it warns us against taking too simplistic a view of the transmission problem since, while they are in broad outline similarly structured, the basic structure which underlies them is quite different from the Irish tales in which a transformed hag episode is found. The similarity between these two groups of tales lies primarily in the simple presence of the transformation incident alone. In each group the occasion for that transformation is different, both structurally and thematically. It is also significant that the "sovereignty" element, which an accident of translation has suggested to be a major common feature of both groups, is not only quite different in kind in the two but also comes from a different source: in the Irish tales the *Flaithius* is external to the hero, it is something which he receives, whereas in the English tales sovereignty is something which resides in the male and which, in these tales at least, he can choose to grant to his wife. While the possibility cannot be ruled out that the incident may indeed be derived from Celtic sources, the considerable differences between these two groups (not to mention the further differences among tales in each group) and the lack of any intermediary texts demonstrating a likely path for transmission make it difficult for us to do more at this time than simply to note this correspondence.

Secondly, this review of the differences among the four English poems gives us some insight into the extent to which individual authors rework the material at hand when producing a particular version of a romance. Because of the numerous thematic links between *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and the framework of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the course of the marriage debate, it is possible for us to see a number of specific instances in which Chaucer has redesigned the tale to suit his own purposes. The structure of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is not as tightly knit as Chaucer's work, and the other two versions of the tale are independent of any external referents. In these cases, therefore, it is more difficult for us to pin down specific touches by each author, but the marked differences in approach in each of these tales demonstrates the wide range of style and theme within which an author or redactor can work when retelling a traditional tale.

NOTES

- 1 See *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, Vol. I, EETS ES 81 (London, 1900) Book I, l.1407ff; *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd ed., London, 1957) p.84ff.. All quotations are from these editions.
- 2 G.H. Maynadier, *The Wife of Bath's Tale, Its Sources and Analogues* (London, 1901); Sigmund Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of the Wife of Bath's Tale* (Folcroft [Pa.], 1957, 1970).
- 3 *Professional Interpreters and the Matter of Britain* (Cardiff, 1966).
- 4 *Op.cit.*, p.703.
- 5 *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* (Cardiff, 1975) p.238.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.97. For the French and German texts see Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal*, ed. William Roach (Geneva and Paris, 1959) ll.4603-41; Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Albert Leitzman (Tübingen, 1961) 313.1-314.10.
- 7 *Op.cit.*, p.98.
- 8 *The White Book Mabinogion*, ed. J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Pwllheli, 1907) col. 165.34-166.15; *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1974) p.217.
- 9 *White Book*, ed. Evans, col.476.2-3.
- 10 *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes* (New York, 1949) p.416.
- 11 "Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin", ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903) pp.196-7. If the author of *Peredur* was striving for an otherworldly effect, as Goetinck suggests, perhaps the long green teeth and green nails of the hag in this Irish tale would seem nearer to the mark than yellow teeth which, we must admit, can be seen in this world.
- 12 Ed. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge; London, 1936) VIII.799-808; trans. Mary Innes (Harmondsworth, 1955) p.200.
- 13 *White Book*, ed. Evans, col.174.33ff; *The Mabinogion*, trans. Jones and Jones, p.224ff.
- 14 *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. William Roach (Philadelphia, 1971) Vol. IV, 20107-20689, 24732-25432, 27601-28238; *The Didot Perceval*, ed. William Roach (Philadelphia, 1941) p.479ff.
- 15 Descriptions of a loathly lady are found elsewhere on the continent as well. In the oldest known (15th c.) manuscript of *Le Livre du Cueur d'Amours Espris* (1457) by René, Duke of Anjou, there is a masterly painting of *Jalousie* perhaps influenced by the description in Chrétien's *Perceval* (and elsewhere in the text is a storm-producing spring, with an illumination, clearly influenced by *Yvain*): see *King René's Book of Love*, ed. F. Unterkircher

(New York, 1975) fol.9. The notion that we are here dealing with a rhetorical topos is reinforced by Hoccleve's lyric, 'La Commendacion de ma Dame' (*Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. R.H. Robbins [2nd ed., Oxford, 1964] No.210): this poem, like the example in *Peredur*, uses parody to structure the description, transferring the ideal gold in this case to the lady's forehead, "ful narw & smal" (2) as her waist should be. I would like to thank Elizabeth Williams for drawing this poem to my attention. The tradition of describing a hideous woman is carried on for allegorical purposes by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*; see esp. I.ix.47-8, II.iv.4, IV.i.27-9. Even in the twentieth century we find the following (presumably independent) description, with accompanying illustration, which fits the same pattern we have seen above: "Your swan's neck is stringy, your graceful shoulders are bony, your succulent breasts are droopy, your elegant belly is corrugated, your creamy thighs are gray, your knee caps bulge, your calves are like golf balls and your toes are like oysters" (Jules Feiffer, *Tantrum* [New York, 1979] p.125).

- 16 For these terms see *A Dictionary of the Irish Language*, fasc. III, ed. Maud Joynt and Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1950). I am grateful to Mr R.L. Thomson for his assistance in this discussion of *flaithius*.
- 17 See Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970) pp.119-20.
- 18 Stokes, "Echtra", pp.200-1. A more accurate translation of the final phrase would be "beautiful and handsome".
- 19 Quoted in OED, s.v. *Sovereignty*, 1.
- 20 "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell", ed. Laura Sumner, *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 5.4 (1924) p.xv.
- 21 *Cóir Anmann* in *Irische Texte*, ed. E. Windisch and W. Stokes, III.2 (Leipzig, 1897) p.316ff; *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. and trans. Edward Gwynn, pt. IV (Dublin, 1924) pp.134-43.
- 22 Windisch and Stokes, op.cit. p.320; my translation.
- 23 Gwynn, op.cit., p.140, ll.101-4.
- 24 Ibid, p.140, ll.107-8.
- 25 Stokes, "Echtra", pp.198-9.
- 26 *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. F.J. Child (New York, 1884, 1965) I, pp.288-96. Cited in text by stanza number.
- 27 Op.cit. (see note 1, above), cited by book and line number.
- 28 References are to line numbers in Robinson's edition (see note 1, above).
- 29 Op.cit. (see note 2, above).
- 30 "Another Analogue for the Violation of the Maiden in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale'", *Modern Language Notes* 59 (1944) pp.271-2; Eisner, pp.53-4.
- 31 Eisner, pp.55-7. For the Ballad, see Child, *Ballads*, III, pp.457-77.

- ³² I am grateful to R.L. Thomson for suggesting this possible motivation. We must remember, of course, that it is neither stated nor implied by Chaucer in the tale itself; therefore, though it fits well into the present reading of the tale, no arguments (much less conclusions) should be based upon this interpretation.
- ³³ The text is cited by line number from the Sumner edition. The reading *kynghte* (116) must surely be a misprint; Sumner does not note it as a scribal error; Sir Frederic Madden prints *knyght* in *Syr Gawayne* (London, 1839) p.298^c.