

**“WHAT DOES A WOMAN WANT?”
EMBRACING THE GODDESS IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**

*“O QUE A MULHER DESEJA?” –
ABRAÇANDO A DEUSA NO ROMANCE MEDIEVAL*

Logan Dale Greene¹

“And as thou hast seen me loathsome, bestial,
horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the
sovereignty; for seldom it is gained without battles
and conflicts; but at last to anyone it is beautiful and
goodly.”

“The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid
Mugmedon”¹

ABSTRACT: This paper examines an archetype, or mytheme, that lies at the heart of a medieval tale, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale from *The Canterbury Tales*. Writers of the fourteenth century used classical mythology as a way of aligning themselves with a revered past and Celtic myth as a way of incorporating the pre-Christian heritage of magic. The mythic narrative employed often changed form to serve the author’s purpose. The Celtic archetype in the Wife’s Tale, an image of transformation, was transformed by Chaucer so that it contributed to the ongoing arguments throughout the Tales about marriage and the nature of women. One of the most compelling images in European mythology is the hero’s embrace of the goddess. This great moment is often represented as a mystical marriage, the *hieros gamos*, which was described by Carl Gustav Jung as the union of self and soul. This ancient story appears in many versions in medieval European literature, including Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale from the *Canterbury Tales*. It is tempting to read Chaucer’s Wife’s tale as a woman’s story: it is told by a female character and arguably bears some relation to the psychology of that character; it is based on an offense done to a young woman; it features the magical hag as a central character; it demonstrates the significant political power of the queen’s court. However, the Wife’s tale derives from the ancient Celtic myth with its archetypal patterns for masculine development. This paper will explore the implications of the myths of the old hag, sometimes called the Loathly Lady, for Chaucer’s Wife’s tale as well as other medieval romances, and it will offer a reading that respects the masculine dynamic implicit in the mythic foundation.

KEYWORDS: Wife of Bath's Tale. Loathly Lady. Jung. Archetype. Feminism.

“Literature develops out of mythology,” said Northrop Frye (21).² In Frye’s view, an examination of the mythic source of a story or work of literature can reveal layers of meaning implicit in the story but of which the author might be unaware. These subtle layers contribute to the story, and knowing them enhances the reader’s understanding of the work in question. The mythic source, in some way, has a life of its own. While many

¹ Department of English, Eastern Washington University (ldgreene@mail.ewu.edu; ewudgreene@gmail.com)

mythologists have considered the mythic content of modern literary works, medieval literature also invites such consideration. This paper examines an archetype, or mytheme, that lies at the heart of a medieval tale, Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale from *The Canterbury Tales*. Writers of the fourteenth century used classical mythology as a way of aligning themselves with a revered past and Celtic myth as a way of incorporating the pre-Christian heritage of magic. The mythic narrative employed often changed form to serve the author's purpose. The Celtic archetype in the Wife's Tale, an image of transformation, was transformed by Chaucer so that it contributed to the ongoing arguments throughout the Tales about marriage and the nature of women. An inquiry into the history and earlier function of this image illuminates another layer of meaning to the Wife's Tale and suggests an altered interpretation of this tale.

One of the most compelling images in European mythology is the hero's embrace of the goddess. This great moment is often represented as a mystical marriage, the *hieros gamos*, which was described by Carl Gustav Jung as the union of self and soul. This ancient story appears in many versions in medieval European literature, including Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale from the *Canterbury Tales*. It is tempting to read Chaucer's Wife's tale as a woman's story: it is told by a female character and arguably bears some relation to the psychology of that character; it is based on an offense done to a young woman; it features the magical hag as a central character; it demonstrates the significant political power of the queen's court. However, the Wife's tale derives from the ancient Celtic myth with its archetypal patterns for masculine development. This paper will explore the implications of the myths of the old hag, sometimes called the Loathly Lady, for Chaucer's Wife's tale as well as other medieval romances, and it will offer a reading that respects the masculine dynamic implicit in the mythic foundation.³

The story element common to the medieval romances to which this paper will be referring concerns an old woman who is transformed into a beautiful girl. The old woman is often referred to as the Loathly Lady. This designation appears in many places.⁴ It may stem from the lament of the reluctantly married knight in Chaucer's version of this story: "Thou art so lothly and so old also" (WBT 244). A survey of Celtic sources for the Loathly Lady reveals her roots in the mythological figure of the *cailleach*, a numinous hag who is sometimes associated with winter, bad weather, and springs.⁵ Roger Sherman

Loomis has sketched the evolution of the mythic character Morgan La Fey, often described as “deformed and ugly to the last degree” (197), in “Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses.” The sources and analogues for Chaucer’s hag – and Gower’s as well – have been well documented: Helen Cooper demonstrates the folktale origins of the hag, calling on *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, and evoking Gower’s tale of Florent in the *Confessio amantis* as a contemporary analogue.⁶ Margaret Schlauch explores the antecedents in Roman rhetoric of the chiasmic dilemma offered by the hag/girl, weaving the choice of chastity versus fidelity with the choice of beauty versus ugliness.

The earliest appearance of the Loathly Lady may be in the old Irish story “The Adventure of Daire’s Sons.”⁷ Daire, king of Ireland, has five sons, all named Lugaid. One of them is destined to be the next king of Ireland. They enter a hunting contest to determine the kingship. Afterwards, one of the sons goes to a house, seeking shelter, and finds a horrible hag, who offers to share her bed with him. He refuses. She declares that by this refusal he has separated himself from “sovranty” and the kingship. At this, he changes his mind and goes into the house with her. When they approach her bed, she transforms. She becomes radiant and beautiful. He embraces her, and she says, “I am the Sovranty, and thou shalt obtain the sovranty of Erin.” The term sovereignty used in this story is significant. We will see that term used again in Chaucer’s tale, but there it will have a different meaning. Here this term operates within a story about kingship and refers to the authority to rule Ireland. The story embodies ancient Celtic traditions of kingship, such as the connection of the king to the land itself and the dependence of the king on the judgment of a woman. The Loathly Lady, when she transforms, becomes “sovranty,” the goddess who bestows the right of kingship, the goddess who represents the land. Thus the hero’s embrace of the Loathly Lady represents his embrace of the land and is essential for his kingship, as Lugaid clearly knows.

The Loathly Lady also makes an appearance in the Tale of Florent from the *Confessio Amantis* by John Gower, Chaucer’s close friend. In this tale, the young knight Florent has killed another knight in combat and then is commanded by the dead knight’s grandmother, as a kind of restitution, to answer the riddle of what women want. Florent sets out on a quest to find the answer. He is told by an old hag that women want

sovereignty, or power, over their men. In payment for this insight, Florent marries the Loathly Lady. On their wedding night, the ugly lady becomes beautiful as soon as her husband lies beside her. After the transformation, she offers him the choice: either beautiful by night, or beautiful by day, but not both. Again, he yields the choice to her, at which she becomes constantly beautiful.

Another version of this archetype appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this story, Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur and chief knight of the Round Table, faces a challenge from a mysterious green man. Keeping his word, Gawain travels for a year to come to the court of the green knight. The lady of the household comes to the feast to greet the famous Gawain. At her side there is an old woman, ancient and hideous and yet, oddly, held in high esteem by all present. Gawain – sensibly, I think – bows to the Loathly Lady before he greets and kisses the beautiful lady. At the end, the Green Knight tells Gawain that the Loathly Lady is Morgan le Fay, or “Morgan the Goddess,” as he calls her, the sister of King Arthur.

The Loathly Lady appears again in the 15th century poem “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.” In this story, King Arthur, hunting in a forest, encounters a knight who has a grudge against Sir Gawain. This knight spares Arthur’s life but makes him promise to report the answer to the riddle – What do women want? – at the end of a year. It’s hard for a modern reader to appreciate the great social weight given to a person’s word, especially the word of a king. It was unthinkable for Arthur not to keep his word, unless his champion were to keep it for him. Arthur finds the Loathly Lady, who promises the answer if she may marry Gawain. The tale describes her ugliness in great detail, from yellow teeth to a humpback. Her horse is quite a bit more attractive than she. On their wedding night, the Loathly Lady is transformed into a beautiful girl. Then Gawain is given the choice: either she will be fair by night and foul by day, or she will be fair by day and foul by night. He yields the choice to her, and so she becomes beautiful continually.

The most familiar appearance of the Loathly Lady may be in the Wife of Bath’s Tale from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. In this fourteenth-century telling, a knight from the court of King Arthur rapes a young virgin. Rather than execute him according to law, the king, at the request of the queen, turns him over to the tender mercies of the ladies of

the court. The queen poses a question to the knight, the correct answer to which will redeem his life. The question is, “What do women want?” (One of my students this past term, a young man, commented that this is every man’s worst nightmare: to have to read a woman’s mind correctly or die.) The knight has one year to find the answer. He travels around asking many people, men and women, the answer to this question. Then, in a forest, he comes across an old woman, the ugliest being he has ever seen, who promises him the answer in return for an open promise from him to do as she asks. He agrees, she whispers the answer, and they ride back to the court together. The knight comes before the assembly of ladies and tells his answer: Women want sovereignty over their husbands and lovers; that is, control, mastery, power.

When the women’s court decides that the knight may live, the ugly old woman stands up and claims credit for the answer, reminding the knight of his promise. She asks to become his wife. He is not pleased, but he marries her the next morning. At night, when they go to their bed, she asks why he seems so unhappy. He says frankly, Because you are so ugly and so old. She tells him then that he can make a choice: either she will continue to be ugly but also faithful, or she will be beautiful but also unfaithful. The knight, apparently having learned something from his recent experiences, leaves the decision in her hands. Once she is given the choice, the Loathly Lady transforms from the ugly hag to a young woman who is beautiful *and* faithful.

The Wife of Bath’s story is about a knight who does wrong and reforms. He rapes a virgin, endures a quest that requires him to think about women’s feelings, and then marries the old woman whose help saves him. The Loathly Lady’s transformation occurs after the knight has deferred to her authority, thus demonstrating that he has learned something about a woman’s desire to choose. The outcome is that the knight is made happy. The heart of this story, in dramatic and psychological terms, is the knight’s quest. The quest is one of the great archetypal elements in medieval romance. The many versions of the story of the Holy Grail center on the quest undertaken by knights of King Arthur’s court to achieve a higher level of spiritual development. Few people except medievalists read the old tale of the Holy Grail, but between Monty Python and *The Da Vinci Code*, the story is still very much alive in our culture. The Grail stories are manifestations of a man’s relationship with the anima.

Three elements in these stories invite attention for mythic elements. One element is the association of the hag with water, either a cup or a well. Another is the hag's transformation. The final element is the name of the hag, which is usually reported as "sovereignty." These mythic elements are clearly articulated in the version of the tale published in Cross and Slover's *Ancient Irish Tales*, "The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon":

The lad [Fergus] went seeking water, till he chanced on a well and saw an old woman guarding it.

Thus was the hag: every joint and limb of her, from the top of her head to the earth, was as black as coal. [Following is a description of her ugliness and the failure of all the sons except Niall to kiss the woman.]

So then Niall went seeking water and happened on the same well. "Give me water, O woman," said Niall.

"I will give it," she answered, "but first give me a kiss."

"Besides giving thee a kiss, I will lie with thee!" Then he threw himself down upon her and gave her a kiss. But then, when he looked at her, there was not in the world a damsel whose figure or appearance was more loveable than hers! [Following is a description of her beauty.]

"Who art thou?" said the youth.

"I am the Sovereignty of Erin," she answered. . . . "And as thou has seen me loathsome, bestial, horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the sovereignty; for seldom it is gained without battles and conflicts; but at last to anyone it is beautiful and goodly." (510-12)

The first element in this passage is the hag's connection with a well. This feature, common to many of the tellings of the Loathly Lady tales, brings to mind the great Celtic goddess Brigid, who was associated with wells, springs, and underground water of all kinds. This goddess became confused with later Christian saints of the same name, at least one of whom is considered to be associated with St. Brigid's Well in County Kildare, Ireland.⁸ However, the well has an older resonance: the *cailleach*, or old woman, mentioned earlier, is also associated with wells and springs.

The *cailleach* is an icon of transformation. The ugly hag of the story is a form of the Celtic *cailleach* (old woman), mentioned above. The late Druid mythographer and historian Insa Thierling distinguishes between Brigid and the *cailleach*; however, most mythographers recognize a significant overlap. James MacKillop describes the Gaelic *cailleach bheur*, or blue hag, as a divinity who is “born old and ugly . . . and ends her time young and beautiful” (63), thus tracing the seasonal change from winter to summer. Patricia Monaghan adds to this the idea that the *cailleach* was probably a pre-Celtic divinity who preceded Brigid (66). Anne Ross points out that, like Brigid, the *cailleach* is associated with springs and rivers, especially those with healing properties. The *cailleach* figure, according to Anne Ross, “seems to suggest persistence of earlier beliefs concerned with the connection of the local goddess with the sacred well” (219). She is the winter goddess, ruling from Samhain to Beltane.⁹ Thus her transformation from hag to beautiful girl fits a seasonal pattern.

The transformed hag asserts the authority to confer sovereignty, or rulership. The term sovereignty undergoes transformations of its own throughout the various versions of the Loathly Lady tales. In his study of the Loathly Lady, William Albrecht considers the meaning of sovereignty in the earliest tales.

Among these stories are certain Irish and English stories which often have been grouped together because they deal with “sovereignty” (although the word does not mean exactly the same thing in both groups of stories).

In one of the earliest extant forms of the loathly-lady story, *The Adventure of Daire’s Sons*, the lady has changed herself into a hag in order to test the hero’s fitness of the “Sovranty of Erin” and recovers her beauty when he has gone to bed with her. In the similar *Adventure of Eochaidh’s Sons* the hag’s ugliness explicitly symbolizes the difficulties of attaining kingship and her beauty its eventual attractiveness. (43)

The term sovereignty in these early tales refers to a magical power that the land gives to the ruler, a power which must come to the king through a woman. In Celtic mythology, this power is sometimes represented by a magical or sacred horse.

The sacred image of the horse, the mystical connection between the horse and the land, and the identification of the land as a female divinity all combine to produce a ritual

in which kingship is attained through mystical union with a horse.¹⁰ The king either mimed or actually had sexual intercourse with a white mare, which represented the Goddess Sovereignty.¹¹ In her study of British mythology, Anne Ross repeats Giraldus Cambrensis' description of this ritual.

The people were reputed to gather together in one place and a white mare was then led in. The king-elect then came before the assembled people on his hands and knees, in the manner of an animal, and declares himself to be a beast. The mare is then killed, after his (supposed) sexual union with it, and cooked. The king-elect next sits in the vessel in which the animal is contained and bathes in the broth and eats the flesh and drinks up the liquid with his mouth. He then becomes king. (325)

This ritual is reported as late as the 12th century in Ulster.¹² Two elements in this ritual suggest a resemblance to the archetypal *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage, which in Jungian terms enacts the integration of the self and the soul. First, the king partakes of the transfigured body of the sacrificed mare by eating its flesh and drinking its essence. The eucharistic nature of this ritual indicates a mystical union. Second, the king dramatizes a sexual union with the horse. Ritual sexual union appears in records of the religious practice of classical gnosticism.¹³ As mentioned above, Jung incorporates this imagery in his appropriation of medieval alchemy as a symbology for modern psychoanalysis.¹⁴ This sacred marriage is, of course, the goal of the hero's quest for the anima. In Celtic myth, the relation to the horse (and through it the Goddess Sovereignty) indicates the right of sacred kingship.¹⁵

Sovereignty in these tales means kingship. When we meet the Loathly Lady in the Wife of Bath's tale, sovereignty has a different meaning, although it may be a little perplexing to try to identify that meaning precisely. As many readers have noted, it is often difficult to say what any of Chaucer's tales is about.¹⁶ The Wife of Bath's tale, in typical Chaucerian fashion, offers the reader a rich selection of ideas and multiple approaches to these ideas. The Wife introduces the tale with a biographical prologue that concludes with a moral that women, and the Wife in particular, desire "maistrie, al the soveraynetee" (Riverside 116), and the Tale concludes with the triumph of "maistrie," defined as a state in which men are "governed by hir wyves" (121-22).

Chaucer turns the meaning of sovereignty in these older tales from political leadership to gender politics. Thus the Wife's tale participates in the *querelle des femmes*, or the marriage debate in George Lyman Kittredge's terms.¹⁷ This turnabout on Chaucer's part was effective on literary grounds. However, Roger Sherman Loomis casts this change in a different light. In his view, Chaucer's reinterpretation of the Loathly Lady reflects an erosion of the mythic power of that figure. In his *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, Loomis reviews the many tales that derive from the original Celtic source, including the Wife of Bath's Tale, in which the Loathly Lady is named Sovereignty.

Just as that concept was itself an attempt to give a euhemeristic meaning to a tale which had lost among Christians its mythological value, so in turn when the story had been adopted into the Arthurian cycle, the euhemeristic significance of the hag's declaration that she was the Sovereignty had faded completely and demanded reinterpretation. A *conteur* casting about for some way to inject sense into his story, naturally thought of the desire of some women for "sovereignty," for having their own way, and refashioned the whole plot to lead up to this dénouement. (300)

Loomis' interpretation casts Chaucer as a storyteller struggling to make human sense of a story the mythic content of which eluded him and in the process fortuitously rediscovering the innate heroic scale of the story. Eliminating the divine from the myth, Loomis implies, brings it back to its historical origins as a tale of heroes.

Yet Loomis recognizes that the power in these stories lies in the presence of the feminine divinity who appears in them: his discussion of the Loathly Lady ends with a lyrical and reverential recognition of the one goddess, known by many names, who underlies the many ladies whom Gawain weds. All Gawain's ladies, Loomis acknowledges, "reveal in one way or another that they are but different manifestations, different names for the same primeval divinity" (310). The feminine divinity in the stories about the Loathly Lady is the *cailleach*, a figure older and wilder than the great goddess Brigid. The *cailleach* can claim the power to confer sovereignty because she is the embodiment of the sacred land. The *cailleach* potentiates the masculine authority of rulership.

The *cailleach* is a feminine icon who generates or enhances or otherwise interacts with masculine power. This is the characteristic of the archetype known as the anima in psychoanalytic theory. The anima is a feminine element, connected with emotion, relationship, and pleasure. It is the feminine component of a man's psyche. C. G. Jung explains the psychological difference between men and women thus: the primary function of men is expressed by the principle of Logos – cognition and discrimination – and the primary function of women is expressed by the principle of Eros – connection. The anima contains in a man's life the qualities that have been culturally marked as feminine, especially relatedness and feeling. Jung ascribes dreams, visions, and fantasies to the work of the anima.

Emma Jung, the wife of the famous analyst, describes the anima in terms that will sound familiar to our reading of medieval romance. She often finds the element of redemption appearing in tales that contain an image of the anima. This element of redemption is involved in the enchantment of a main character. She says, "Behind the animal form is concealed a higher being which must be redeemed and with which the hero will eventually unite" (57). Her interpretations of the anima rely heavily on fairy tales involving marriage and a woman who is magically transformed. She says, "One function of the anima is to be a looking glass for a man" (65). The outcome of the struggle or quest undertaken by the hero is a new and more highly developed relationship to the anima. As she says: "When the anima is recognized and integrated a change of attitude occurs toward the feminine generally" (87). These descriptions of the anima clearly place the anima in the realm of masculine identity and experience.

Identifying the *cailleach* as a representation of the anima requires us to consider two implications: first, that the Loathly Lady stories are in many important ways stories about men or a masculine psychic process; and second, that the question embedded in these stories either overtly or covertly – "What does a woman want?" – is supremely important and must be addressed. At some level, asking this question might be the fundamental point of the story. "What does a woman want?" This question has an unusual resonance in Western literature. Chaucer's queen, in the Wife of Bath's tale, requires the knight to discover "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (117). Sigmund Freud, in a conversation with his friend Marie Bonaparte, asked, "Was will das

Weib?” (What does the woman want?)¹⁸ In *Feminine Sexuality*, Jacques Lacan also took up this question, consciously echoing Freud:

This year I am taking up what Freud expressly left aside, the *Was will das Weib?* the *What does the woman want?* Freud argues that there is no libido other than masculine. Meaning what? other than that a whole field, which is hardly negligible, is thereby ignored. (151)

It has long intrigued me that this question – “What does a woman want?” – occurs in medieval romances characterized by archetypal moments of numinous transformation and also occurs in psychoanalytic literature. The continuing power of this question is attested by the recent publication of two psychoanalytic studies titled *What Does a Woman Want?*¹⁹ The answer that comes to us from these modern writers, including Freud, is ambiguous at best; perhaps, as Shoshana Felman says in her book of this name, the question is unanswerable.

In *What Does a Woman Want?* Felman, a psychoanalyst and a student of Lacan, extends the concept of feminist reading articulated by Judith Fetterly. In *The Resisting Reader*, Fetterly observes that women become resisting readers as a way of reading past the masculine consciousness that pervades most writing. Felman offers a definition of literature – as she points out, a definition subject to controversy – as a written text that eludes or surpasses the authority of the Master. Thus a literary text generates its own authority and in some way exceeds conventional or orthodox ideology.²⁰ Felman suggests that women reading literature can not only find resistance within themselves but can find resistance within the text.

All great texts, I will propose, are literary to the precise extent that they are self-transgressive with respect to the conscious ideologies that inform them. This is why my effort in this book, in being careful never to foreclose or to determine in advance the reading process, is to train myself *to tune into the forms of resistance present in the text*, those forms that make up the textual dynamic as a field of clashing and heterogeneous forces and as a never quite predictable potential of *surprise*. My effort is, in other words, not to “resist” the text from the outside but rather to seek to trace within each text its *own resistance to itself*, its own specific

literary, inadvertent textual transgression of its male assumptions and prescriptions. (6, emphasis in original)

Felman aims to notice the forms of resistance present in a text and thus let the text lead her to the unconscious and unacknowledged woman within the text. This process depends upon the text's inherent dialogic multiplicity; the reader mines the gaps deconstructively.

In a similar way, the unconscious and unacknowledged dimensions of the woman can be read in the concept of the anima, which is the heart and soul of the man. Jung's description of the archetype of the anima encapsulates the nineteenth and twentieth century understanding in Western Europe and America of woman as a male-dependent commodity. Our understanding has changed; the range of women's experience has changed. The question remains: What do women want? Chaucer's answer, sovereignty, seems simplistic. Lacan's answer to this question is enigmatic. In an elegant mathematical formulation, Lacan suggests that "woman" is, on a cultural rather than a personal level, the hysteric who refuses the authority of the master discourse. The hysteric generates a new signifier and thus claims a kind of mastery, a kind of sovereignty. Is sovereignty the answer to this question? If so, what does sovereignty mean here?

The timeless and often repeated story of the hero's journey is profoundly a masculine psychic dynamic. C. G. Jung describes the critical importance of this journey for the developing consciousness of a man in several places, particularly in *Mysterium Coniunctionis* and in *Aion*. The search for the numinous image of the anima forces the young man out of the originary matrix of childhood into adult consciousness. The successful encounter with this image allows the young man to withdraw his projection – the transfer of internal dynamics onto the external world, especially onto other persons – from his mother onto a woman to whom he will give his mature love.

The projection can only be dissolved when the son sees that in the realm of his psyche there is an imago not only of the mother but of the daughter, the sister, the beloved, the heavenly goddess, and the chthonic Baubo. Every mother and every beloved is forced to become the carrier and embodiment of this omnipresent and ageless image, which corresponds to the deepest reality in a man. It belongs to him, this perilous image of

Woman; she stands for the loyalty which in the interests of life he must sometimes forgo; she is the much needed compensation for the risks, struggles, sacrifices that all end in disappointment; she is the solace for all the bitterness of life. (*Aion* 12-13)

The feminine imago, which is also called the anima, leads the man from childhood into manhood and later challenges him to a fuller spiritual development. Jung describes a similar, corresponding developmental dynamic in women; however, we are concerned here with the anima and its role in the hero's journey. For men, that journey is a primary function.²¹ Thus the mythic hero's meeting with the goddess enacts the critical developmental task of the young man.

Joseph Campbell repeats this Jungian dynamic by translating it into myth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He centers this psychic journey on the meeting with the goddess:

The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage (ιερός γάμος) [hieros gamos] of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart. (109)

The mystical marriage to which Campbell refers is sometimes represented in the Loathly Lady stories by the kiss demanded by the hag, as in "The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon," and sometimes by a wedding, as in the Wife of Bath's tale. The "Queen-Goddess of the World," who is the bride of the hero, is the Loathly Lady in her true identity; for as Sovereignty she is the goddess of the land, who has the authority to choose kings. The goddess Sovereignty may be a historical remnant of a mythic world in which rulership was not the result of popular election but numinous selection; she is also the living and timeless archetype of the developmental dynamic that turns boys into men. The function of this mythic icon in masculine development reveals the power in the hag's transformation. As the young man must move emotionally from his mother to his wife, so the hag transforms from the old and ugly crone to the young and beautiful girl. The

transformation of the *cailleach* mirrors the internal transformation in the man. Thus the *cailleach* is a projection of the masculine process.

In Chaucer's tale, this masculine process functions to illustrate the story of the Wife of Bath. This story, like the similar romances featuring Sir Gawain, is at its foundation a man's story, the story of a knight who searches for salvation, redemption, or – in Jungian terms – integration. Thus behind the narrator of the tale, the Wife, stands the narrator of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer. The layered narration of this tale generates an interesting irony: it is a tale told by a woman within a framework of tales told by a man, employing a myth that features a numinous feminine figure who is an icon of masculine psychic development. The source of this myth in masculine archetypology does not negate its function in the Wife's tale as a woman's story. It is still a story told by a woman, a story about a woman, and a story centered on a woman. The transformation of the *cailleach*, the ancient pre-Celtic goddess, from an ugly hag to a beautiful girl shines through the many romances that contain some version of this myth and endow them with the legacy of magic.

¹ *Echtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin*, or “The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon,” is part of the Historical Cycle of Irish legends. This story can be found in Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, from which this passage is taken (512); it is quoted in a different translation in Caitlin Matthews, *King Arthur and the Goddess of the Land*, 1.

² In the passage in which this statement occurs, Frye discusses the function of myth to express deep concerns and even ideological values. He mentions the function of poets also in expressing the concerns and ideologies of their cultures. Thus a poet, such as Chaucer, has a special ability to articulate, although perhaps at times unconsciously, the visions and anxieties of his age.

³ Much of this same research appears in an essay by Amy Eichhorn-Mulligan, “The Anatomy of Power and the Miracle of Kingship: The Female Body of Sovereignty in a Medieval Irish Kingship Tale” (*Speculum* 81.4 [2006]: 1014-54), which appeared in print before this essay was published but after it was written. Eichhorn-Mulligan’s essay brings this material to a different conclusion than this essay, focusing on the historical conditions of kingship in ancient Ireland and issues of physical perfection versus the grotesque distortions of leprosy.

⁴ Another version of this story, titled “The Marriage of Sir Gawain and the Loathly Damsel,” was translated by the Celtic scholar Alfred Nutt and published in *The Academy* 1043 (1892): 425-26. William Albrecht uses this phrase in his 1954 study *The Loathly Lady in “Thomas of Erceldoune.”* The recent work on this subject by Caitlin Matthews, *King Arthur and the Goddess of the Land*, refers often to the two contrasting figures of “the Grail Maiden and the Loathly Lady” (191).

⁵ See *cailleach* in the online source <http://celt.net/Celtic/celtopedia/c.html> and the online article at <http://www.caerclud.vscotland.org.uk/cailleach.html>. The word *cailleach* is derived from the borrowed Latin word *pallium*, veil, and means “the veiled one.” Because of this etymology, the term *cailleach* is sometimes used to refer to a nun.

⁶ Cooper interprets the “sovereignty” in the Wife’s tale as “the Wife’s conscious desires for mastery” and the Wife’s less conscious desire “for the restoring of her lost youth and beauty” (156-57). The term “sovereignty,” central to an understanding of the hag, shifts meanings from tale to tale, as we shall see.

⁷ This version of the story, which is taken from the Introduction of George Saul’s 1934 *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, is attributed to “Miss Sumner” and cited from the introduction to a 1901 edition of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, which I have been unable to locate. I paraphrase Saul’s quotation of Miss Sumner’s summary. The legend of Daire and his sons appears in *The Book of Ballymote*, a fourteenth-century Irish manuscript.

⁸ See MacKillop 52. For the identity of Brighid and Brigantia, the eponymous goddess associated with rivers and waters, see Ross 21, MacKillop 52.

⁹ The Celtic holy day Samhain, which has descended to us as Hallowe’en, was considered the beginning of winter, and Beltane, which survives as May Day, was the beginning of summer.

¹⁰ For sacred horse imagery, see Anne Ross, 321-33; for female divinity, see Caitlin Matthews, *King Arthur and the Goddess of the Land*.

¹¹ Reported in Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica* iii; his narrative is paraphrased in Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* 325.

¹² Giraldus Cambrensis reports a date of 1185.

¹³ Reported in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis 76-77.

¹⁴ See Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, especially 469 ff. For a simplified explanation, see Edward Edinger, *The Mystery of the Coniunction*, especially 62 ff.

¹⁵ In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell, in his discussion of the appearance of Krishna to Arjuna described in the *Bhagavad Gita*, recalls the description of the sacrificial horse from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: “The head of the sacrificial horse is the dawn, its eye the sun, its vital force the air, its open mouth the fire called Vaishvanara, and the body of the sacrificial horse is the year” (235). Campbell connects this image with the horse in Robinson Jeffers’ poem *Cawdor*. A connection might also be made to Tom Stoppard’s play *Equus*.

¹⁶ In his new preface to the Donald Howard edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, Frank Grady reports a student’s response to reading the Tales: “I guess he makes sense, but I wish he would have an idea

and stick to it and make it a lot easier on us” (8).

¹⁷ Kittredge’s now-classic argument was published first as “Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage” in *Modern Philology* in 1911 and was included in his book *Chaucer and His Poetry*; an excerpt from the book version is included in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edition.

¹⁸ Ernest Jones reports this comment in his biography of Freud:

There is little doubt that Freud found the psychology of women more enigmatic than that of men. He said once to Marie Bonaparte: “The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” (421)

¹⁹ One book by this name was published by Shoshana Felman in 1993 and one by Serge Andre in 1999.

²⁰ Felman develops this idea fully in *Writing and Madness*.

²¹ Jung’s neat polarization of personality characteristics into masculine and feminine has been criticized by many, including other Jungian analysts. John Beebe, in his introduction to *Aspects of the Masculine*, tries to clarify Jung’s complex and sometimes obscure prose on this subject even while he challenges this polarity:

On the other hand, Jung’s idea of logos as the masculine principle and eros as the feminine principle has led to premature dogmatizing by some Jungian analysts as to the essential psychological character of men and of women and a storm of protest by other analysts, who have argued rightly for the complexity of individual experience. It is important to recognize that logos and eros are styles of consciousness available ultimately to both sexes, and that they represented opposites within Jung’s own masculine nature. (xv)

Joseph Campbell, in his Editor’s Introduction to *The Portable Jung*, points out that Jung found modern religion to have an “excessively masculine, patriarchal emphasis” (xxix) and turned to alchemy for his psychoanalytic symbology “since in philosophical alchemy the feminine principle plays a no less important part than the masculine.”

RESUMO: Este ensaio examina um arquétipo que é central a um conto medieval, “O Conto da Mulher de Bath”, de *Os Contos de Cantuária*, de Chaucer. Os escritores do século XIV usavam a mitologia clássica como um modo de se associar ao mito celta e a um passado reverenciado, de forma a incorporar uma herança pré-cristã. A narrativa mítica empregada frequentemente trocava de forma para servir aos propósitos do autor. O arquétipo celta em “O Conto da Mulher de Bath”, uma imagem de transformação, foi mudada por Chaucer de forma a contribuir para os argumentos apresentados ao longo dos *Contos* sobre o casamento e a natureza das mulheres. Uma das mais interessantes imagens da mitologia européia é a do abraço do herói à deusa. Este grande momento é frequentemente representado como um casamento místico, o *hieros gamos*, que foi descrito por Carl Gustav Jung como a união do eu e da alma. Esta história aparece em muitas versões da literatura européia medieval, inclusive em “O Conto da Mulher de Bath”, em *Os Contos de Cantuária* de Chaucer. É tentador ler esse conto como uma história de uma mulher: é contado por uma personagem feminina e tem relação com sua psicologia; é baseado numa ofensa cometida contra uma jovem mulher, tem como seu personagem central a velha e feia mágica e demonstra o significativo poder político da corte da rainha. Contudo, “O Conto da Mulher de Bath” deriva de antigo mito celta, com seus padrões para o desenvolvimento masculino. Este estudo explora as implicações do mito da velha feia, algumas vezes chamada de Dama Repugnante, no conto de Chaucer e em outros romances medievais, e oferece uma leitura da dinâmica masculina implícita nesse mito fundacional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: O Conto da Mulher de Bath. A Dama Repugnante. Jung. Arquétipo. Feminismo.

Works Cited

Albrecht, William. *The Loathly Lady in “Thomas of Erceldoune.”* Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1954.

Beebe, John. “Introduction.” *Aspects of the Masculine*. By C. G. Jung. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.

- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series XVII. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949.
- , ed. *The Portable Jung*. By C. G. Jung. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. New York: Penguin, 1971.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." *The Canterbury Tales. The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Gen. ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 105-122.
- . *The Canterbury Tales: A Selection*. Ed. Donald R. Howard. Preface by Frank Grady. Signet Classics. New York: Penguin, 1969. Preface 2005.
- . *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue*. Norton Critical Edition. 2nd ed. Ed. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Cooper, Helen. *The Canterbury Tales. Oxford Guides to Chaucer*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Cross, Tom P. and Clark H. Slover, eds. *Ancient Irish Tales*. New York: Henry Holt, 1936.
- Edinger, Edward F. *The Mystery of the Coniunctio: Alchemical Image of Individuation*. Toronto: Inner City, 1994.
- Felman, Shoshana. *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.
- . *Writing and Madness*. 1978, 1985. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2003.
- Fetterly, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978.
- Frye, Northrop. "Literary and Linguistic Scholarship in a Postliterate World." *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, 1990.
- Jones, Ernest. *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. Volume 2. New York: Basic, 1955.
- Kittredge, George Lyman. "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage." *Modern Philology* 9 (1911-12): 435-67.
- . *Chaucer and His Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1915.
- Jung, C. G. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1959.
- . *Four Archetypes: Mother/Rebirth/Spirit/Trickster*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1959.
- . *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Feminine Sexuality*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. Trans. Jacqueline Rose. New York: W. W. Norton, 1982.
- Loomis, Roger S. "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses." *Speculum* 20.2 (1945): 183-203.

---. *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1997.

MacKillop, James. *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.

Matthews, Caitlin. *King Arthur and the Goddess of the Land: The Divine Feminine in the Mabinogion*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002.

Monaghan, Patricia. *The Book of Goddesses and Heroines*. Revised edition. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1990.

Ross, Anne. *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.

Saul, George, trans. *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1934.

Schlauch, Margaret. "Marital Dilemma in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *PMLA* 61.2 (1946): 416-30.

Thierling, Insa. "More than Winter's Crone: The Cailleach in Scotland." Accessed July 11, 2005. Reprinted from *Tooth & Claw*, the journal of the British Druid Order, May 2001. <http://www.caerclud.vscotland.org.uk/cailleach.html>