

The Legends of the Loathly Lady:
Finding Truth Through Transformation

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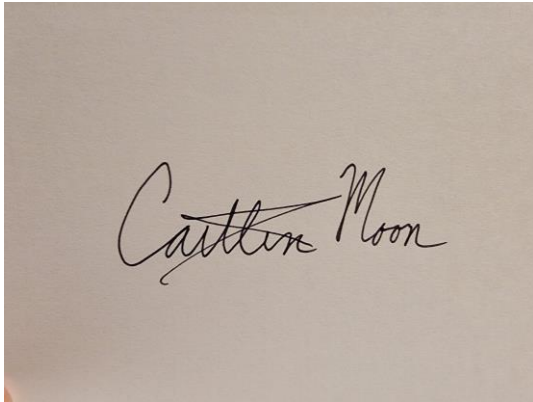
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Caitlin Moon

Summary

This work examines the Loathly Lady in selected Irish and English texts ranging from the end of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries from the perspective of disability studies. This is the first cohesive study of the Loathly Lady as well as the first significant application of the theory of spectral disability. Spectral disability: the fear and inevitability of ageing, disfigurement, impairment, and death, is consistently a part of the didactic role of the Loathly Lady.

This study explores the Irish and English medieval texts to illustrate how the texts reflect the evolving nature of sovereignty and nobility in a time of great social change. It goes on to examine the body of the Loathly Lady and other aged figures as the embodiment of spectral disability within an unsustainably youthful and morally flawed chivalric culture. While the focus of this thesis is nominally the Loathly Lady, her didactic presence and impaired body show that the focus of these texts is the young chivalric male protagonist and his personal sense of nobility.

The first chapter is not only the first presentation of the Irish sovereignty myth as an analogue for the English material, but also the first application of disability studies to Irish saga by analyzing the significant relationship between disfigurement and sovereignty in a medieval Irish context. The second chapter expands upon the limited discussion of John Gower as a disabled author to show that the disabled Loathly Lady is the didactic character that Amans, Gower's textual avatar and an inappropriate lover, should look to in the "Tale of Florent." The third chapter looks at the aging Wife of Bath as an inappropriate lover and the Loathly Lady as her avatar. This chapter shows that her Prologue and her Tale are deliberately

linked through their shared parodic elements of male and female conduct literature. The fourth chapter is the first comprehensive reading of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a Loathly Lady figure. The fifth chapter looks at the bodies of Loathly figures in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* as well as in applicable Gawain romances to show the flaws in the ageist and ableist chivalric culture.

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Introduction

Beauty and the Beast, the 1991 musical animated classic produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation, introduced the Loathly Lady to modern popular consciousness.¹ The movie begins with a prince in a shining castle and an ugly beggar woman who asked him for shelter from the bitter cold. “Repulsed by her haggard appearance,” he refused. In a didactic message that echoes throughout the rest of the film, she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, “for beauty is found within.” The Loathly Lady’s curse on the prince in *Beauty and the Beast* is part of a tradition of loathly ladies educating men of princely rank which begins in the Irish sovereignty myths. This develops through the English tradition by exploring issues of marital sovereignty while she teaches the protagonist how to be a good chivalric hero. Within these texts, it becomes clear that chivalry was a malleable social code of conduct which was used by the elite to justify their control of political sovereignty. The consistent moralistic message of the Loathly Lady— that the disabled, the disfigured, the elderly, the impoverished, and the Other have value and are worthy of respect— stems from the challenge that her nonnormative body presents to the protagonist. As a rare representation of female old age in literature that focuses on a youthful male warrior culture, she embodies the fear of ageing and disability yet to come. Through the guise of Arthurian romance, the Loathly Lady tales offer a critique of those who maintain political sovereignty and their behavior.

¹ *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc., 1991), 84 minutes, https://www.amazon.com/Beauty-Beast-Theatrical-Version-Paige/dp/B01HE0AV7K/ref=sr_1_3?crid=24M4FC1MYEJ4K&keywords=beauty+and+the+beast+prime&qid=1698654312&s=movies-tv&sprefix=beauty+and+the+beast+prime%2Cmovies-tv%2C146&sr=1-3.

The Loathly Lady, categorized as Motif D732 in Stith Thompson's motif index, appears in multiple famous medieval works.² As in *Beauty and the Beast*, she is an exceptionally ugly woman who transforms into a beautiful young lady. The actions of a young male protagonist towards the Loathly Lady are the catalyst for her transformation. While the Loathly Lady's appearance is not always the byproduct of a curse, her transformation is a consequence of the moral lesson that the protagonist has learned from her. Once he honors his promise to marry her and satisfies her despite her appearance, he has proven that he is worthy of the beautiful bride that she becomes. The Loathly Lady is an easily recognizable figure that has had a major impact on the medieval English imagination. In each of the tales, the Loathly Lady is the opposite of the medieval feminine literary ideal. As Diane Bornstein writes: "In a typical romance, little attention is given to the characterization of the lady, who exists mainly as a motivating force or source of inspiration for the knight."³ In the Loathly Lady tales, she is a driving force and a main character. Not only does she challenge the morality of the knight, but she also helps him to reach a new level of maturity and potential.

The Loathly Lady is the inverse of the passive romantic lady not just in her behavior, but also in her appearance. Bornstein explains that the woman in romance was a figure of ideal beauty: "She is normally portrayed as a young woman with long blonde hair, grey-blue eyes, a small red mouth, a red and white complexion, and a slim body."⁴ The Loathly Lady is the aged mirror-image of this description. In almost all the texts, she has grey coarse hair, bleary dark eyes, a frightening mouth, rough wrinkled skin, and a broad misshapen body. These are all

² Hasan M. El-Shamy and Jane Garry, editors. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2016), 130.

³ Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1983), 9.

⁴ Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower*, 9.

physical characteristics and impairments associated with old age. While the Loathly Lady is clearly a disabled figure, only Tory Vandeventer Pearman has read her through the lens of disability studies in a single chapter, which was published in 2010.⁵ Since then, the relationship between the humanities and disability studies has greatly evolved. This thesis uses disability theories to analyze the consistencies in the motif which begin in the Irish material and are present throughout the tradition while addressing the implications of the Loathly Lady's experience with disability through the first major application of spectral disability theory. The revulsion that the Loathly Lady's body causes in the protagonist, the wider court, and the reader is triggered by the fear of becoming equally ugly and disabled. By embracing this inevitability, it is possible to embrace those who are experiencing these impairments and become a better person.

Spectral disability is a powerful but under-utilized aspect of disability theory that was coined by Robert McRuer: "if we live long enough, disability is the one identity we will all inhabit."⁶ Later, it is acknowledged by Juárez-Almendros as "the idea that disability will sooner or later be experienced by all human beings."⁷ In order to expand upon this limited definition and successfully apply this new theory to a medieval literary context, it is necessary to refer to other critics who actively analyze disability in a medieval context. Julie Orelmanski writes that within medieval literature "disability" also functions as a form of historical *prosthesis*.⁸ Richard H. Godden further expands upon the social mode and moral implications of

⁵ Tory Vandeventer Pearman, "Disruptive Dames: Disability and the Loathly Lady in the Tale of Florent, the Wife of Bath's Tale, and the Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle." in *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe: Examining Disability in the Historical, Legal, Literary, Medical, and Religious Discourses of the Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy J. Turner (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 291–312.

⁶ Robert McRuer. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 200.

⁷ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 3.

⁸ Julie Orelmanski, "Literary Genre, Medieval Studies, and the Prosthesis of Disability," *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (November 9, 2016): 1253–72, 1253.

disability within a medieval literary context as a tool for ethical discourse.⁹ Through his examples of “The Cure of the Blind Man,” a didactic mystery play which morally instructed the audience on how to see the disabled man as an equal member of society, Godden hints at the potentially didactic role of disabled figures in medieval literature.¹⁰ By expanding the definition of spectral disability from “the fear of inevitable disability or death” to include “the subsequent potentially negative social restrictions based on bodily appearance as a result of disability or impairment,” the Loathly Lady tradition takes on not only a didactic element of how one should treat the disabled, the elderly, or the Other, it also shows contemporary fears surrounding disability, impairments, social mobility, class structure, gender boundaries, and old age.

This thesis is the first significant academic work to actively engage with this theory. The application of spectral disability allows for this thesis to offer a new and original interpretation of the Loathly Lady not only by reading her as a uniquely impaired example of old age in romantic texts, but she also embodies the wider fear of age and impairment as a form of corruption that is gendered female as well as class-based anxieties in the youthful male-dominated chivalric culture. In her loathly form, she embodies spectral disability. In each of the Loathly Lady tales, the description of her body gives a series of impairments, whether described in hyperbolic detail or subtly implied. The description of her loathly form is always consistent with the impairments exhibited by the human body as the result of advanced age.

Scholarship has been relatively limited on the topic of the Loathly Lady, which makes this study a valuable contribution. While aspects of the Loathly Lady in certain tales have been discussed from a variety of perspectives in articles, chapters, and even the occasional thesis,

⁹ Richard H. Godden, “Neighboring Disability in Medieval Literature,” *Exemplaria* 32, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 229–247, 229.

¹⁰ Godden, “Neighboring,” 229.

there has yet to be a monograph on this popular figure. The only existing book on the Loathly Lady was edited by S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter in 2007. The book contains eleven chapters written by scholars such as R. F. Yeager, Russel A. Peck, and Mary Leech, on various aspects of the English tradition. Like this thesis, the chapters follow the texts in chronological order. Passmore, who wrote the first chapter in the collection, is the only one to discuss the Irish connections in detail. Even in this instance, her focus is on the English tradition of the motif. This is the only book that specifically focuses on the Loathly Lady, with the link between the chapters being the English tradition itself. Given the considerable gaps in scholarship on the topic, this independent study is of great importance. The Loathly Lady is one of the most recognizable disabled figures in medieval literature. The emphasis on her body, and the consistently present issues of gender, class, and morality, presents the perfect intersection of medieval literature and disability studies. Given that the Irish sovereignty goddess has never been properly studied as a disabled figure, and Pearman's discussion of the English Loathly Lady as a disabled woman is relatively brief and difficult to access, the present study represents an important and timely intervention into the field. While scholars such as S. Elizabeth Passmore, Lauren Chochinov, Lorraine Kosenke Stock, and others view the Irish sovereignty myth as the source or origin of the English Loathly Lady tradition, the manuscript that provides the standardized translation of the Irish text is not only contemporaneous to the "Tale of Florent" and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" it is also an analogue. The Merriam-Webster dictionary explains that an analogue is "something that is similar to something else in design, origin, use, etc."¹¹ The

¹¹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "analogue," accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analogue>.

Irish material shares numerous thematic and narrative elements with the English tradition; while both focus on the importance of sovereignty, they emphasize this in different ways.

The Loathly Lady's impairments and nonnormative body are fundamental to advancing the plot in each of the Loathly Lady tales. The English Loathly Lady originates from an Irish sovereignty goddess found in the *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* [The Adventures of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón]. Her body was not just a representation of the varying states of political sovereignty, but also a test of the integrity of the next king. This test of the protagonist's chivalric behavior by a wise hag is central to the English Loathly Lady tales. Canonically, the three most traditional tales are the "Tale of Florent" by John Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* (c.1386-1390), "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" by Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), and the unattributed *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, which can be dated to the fifteenth century.¹² In the "Tale of Florent" and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" the Loathly Lady saves the knightly protagonist's life by giving him the answer to a riddle if he agrees to marry her. The answer to the riddle ("what do women most desire?") is "sovereignty." These and other variants of the Loathly Lady tale discussed in this thesis, such as the late fourteenth century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (c. 1400), and late fourteenth or very early fifteenth century text *The Awntyrs off Arthur* are all canonically set within the realm of romance. Sovereignty is still a significant element of these texts, although they become more critical of King Arthur and his abuse of power. Through a thorough re-

¹² Thomas Hahn, "Introduction," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Western Michigan University: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-introduction>.

evaluation of the Irish analogues and the application of disability studies, the didactic message of these tales becomes clear.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine, from the perspective of the social mode of disability theories, the concepts and the roles of sovereignty, age, and disability in the Loathly Lady tales from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. While the primary focus of this thesis is on the English material, I also expand the limited discussion of the Irish source material to gain new insight on the roles of sovereignty and disability in the English texts. My central argument is that the Loathly Lady is always a teaching figure. Whether she appears in an early Irish sovereignty myth or in Walt Disney's animated film *Beauty and the Beast*, she is always teaching us how to treat the disabled, the elderly, the Other. This learned respect is a sign of personal nobility which evolves from the code of chivalry. The Loathly Lady's moralizing message stems from the challenge presented to the seemingly perfect young male protagonist by the Loathly Lady's disabled, deformed, and stigmatized body. Her aged body, which is riddled with impairments, is viewed as hideously ugly, sometimes frighteningly grotesque, through the eyes of the narrator and society. The challenge that she presents to the young handsome male protagonist is not simply to determine if he is worthy of sovereignty or a beautiful wife. Her purpose is to test his personal nobility and see how he treats someone who is an ill and impoverished older woman; someone who seemingly offers no value to the young aristocrat. Each of the texts consistently deals with themes of class, gender, and identity politics which are central to the overarching message. Issues of gender and class are important throughout the Loathly Lady tales, as the implications of ageing are very different for men and women, as well as for the wealthy and the poor. By applying disability theories to this motif, the medieval perception of disability and the elderly becomes clearer.

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field that originated in the social sciences and political movements of the 1970s before being adopted by the humanities. To this end, its methodology has been used to “investigate, uncover and denounce constructions of concepts and institutional barriers that have traditionally resulted in the segregation of individuals that do not conform to bodily ideals.”¹³ This has been applied to both political and social movements that have led to the creation of various laws and reform, as well as the development of an analytical method of study.¹⁴ A variety of methodologies are used to analyze different aspects of disability including identity politics and perceptions of the body. The most influential theory in disability studies is the “social mode of disability.” This was developed in 1976 by a group of disabled English activists, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). This archetype provides:

an alternative to the conventional ways of explaining disability as an individual tragedy or curse, or as a medical problem that needs to be cured or repaired, proposing a distinction between disability (as social exclusion) and impairment as physical limitation, and arguing that disabled people are politically oppressed.¹⁵

While this theory has been applied in terms of neat dichotomies (abled vs disabled; individual vs society), the lived experience of disability is as unique as the individual experiencing it.

Current trends in disability studies are wide-ranging, which allows for an extensive variety of critical frameworks that draw from other disciplines. The intersection between disability studies and medieval literature is a small but growing conversation. As Tory Vandeventer Pearman writes, “the Middle Ages was a time in which the body was an important

¹³ Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, *Disabled Bodies in Early modern Spanish Literature: Prostitutes, Aging Women and Saints* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 1.

¹⁴ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

site of spiritual, scientific, and epistemological questioning.”¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum has examined the increasing emphasis on the spiritual internal reality and the body towards the end of the medieval period, which has been termed “an incarnational aesthetic” by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury.¹⁷ Within the Loathly Lady tales, the dichotomy between the Loathly Lady’s hideously aged body and the shining beauty of the young protagonist creates not only an aesthetic, but also a moral and a social tension that is central the narrative’s message. The tension is rooted in spectral disability. This theory is readily applicable to the warrior culture of the romance genre, especially to some of the Loathly Lady tales.

While traditional studies of the Loathly Lady have focused on how the English text transforms ideas of sovereignty from political to personal marital or sexual issues, using the spectral disability theory to engage with a different set of questions around the fear of ageing and disability, as well as the fear of social mobility in a tumultuous social and political environment. The relationship between the physical body and sovereignty is directly affected by the presence of ageism and spectral disability within each of the Loathly Lady tales. Ageism and its relationship to ableism is a largely unexplored topic, especially within the junction between disability studies and medieval literature.¹⁸ This is not only because disability studies is a relatively new academic field, but also because of the problematic implications of applying

¹⁶ Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

¹⁷ Linda Lomperis, and Sarah Stanbury, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), viii. Cited by Pearman, *Women*, 1. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Discrimination and discriminatory practices against older people and the ageing process which are based on sexism and racism while perpetuating stereotypes. R. N. Butler, “Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry.” *The Gerontologist* 9, no. 4 (1969): 243–246.

Ableism is defined as “discrimination or prejudices against those with disabilities.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “ableism,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ableism>.

disability theory to texts and experiences that existed before the definitions and perceptions of the modern era. Based on Butler's definition of ageism, it is clear to see that the Loathly Lady embodies spectral disability and triggers the ableism of the youthful protagonist and his chivalric warrior environment in each of the texts. Overcoming this ageism and seeing the Loathly Lady's worth is the heart of the didactic challenge. However, this prejudice is not simply rooted in the Loathly Lady's initially aged body, it is also due to her perceived class and her biological sex.

Although the term "ageism" was first coined in 1969, the medieval texts depict reactions of the characters to the Loathly Lady's impaired body that perfectly perform this prejudice.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the courtly reaction to her would be different if she had been a man. The gendered medieval interpretation of aging can be seen in contemporary philosophical thought. J. A. Burrow examines the medieval philosophical practice of dividing a man's life into either three, four, or seven "Ages," each having their own physical characteristics, appropriate behaviors, and social worth.²⁰ This theory, which is rooted in classical authorities, is known as the Ages of Man *topos*. It grants intellectual and moral value to old men.²¹ There is no corresponding Ages of woman *topos*. A medieval woman's value was based on her physical appearance and how her body functioned within its designated social space and ideals. Pearman uses a gendered model of disability to contextualize the medieval female body as innately disabled based on contemporary ecclesiastical, medical, and social perspectives.²² Juárez-Almendros is one of the only scholars to thoroughly analyze the representation of the aged female body in literature as an example of

¹⁹ Butler, "Age-ism," 243-246.

²⁰ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (New York, NY: ACLS History E-Book, 2015), 1-3.

²¹ Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 1.

²² Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 70-71.

disability.²³ Only Pearman's chapter has explicitly analyzed the Loathly Lady as a disabled figure and the affect that her impairments have on the narrative. While she successfully applies disability theory to the three canonical Loathly Ladies, they become conflated within the argument. Although the Loathly Lady consistently exhibits impairments that are associated with old age and advances the plot for a similar didactic purpose, they are as unique as the texts in which they appear and are thus worthy of individual analysis.

Not only does the Loathly Lady embody the wider concept of sovereignty, but she also embodies the universal fear of ageing, disability, and inevitable death. Her grotesque body consistently exhibits impairments that are associated with old age and poverty, which the young noble protagonist must embrace with respect and courtesy. In each encounter with a Loathly figure, the protagonist must overcome his repulsion and his prejudice to reach a positive outcome. The "Happily Ever After" of a beautiful wife and a happy marriage is the reward for his good behavior, which reinforces the moralistic message for the reader. These tales show that the impaired, the elderly, and the Other have societal worth and should be treated with respect by the young and the more fortunate.

The first chapter in this thesis analyzes the significant relationship between disability and sovereignty in two early Irish political texts. This is the very first application of disability studies to the genre of Irish saga. The first text, the *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* [The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedóin] is an eleventh century Irish sovereignty myth and considered to be the origins of the Loathly Lady motif. It is still a tale of great cultural significance and was reproduced in multiple Irish manuscripts. The standardized Middle Irish

²³ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 2-3.

version and corresponding standardized English translation was completed in 1903 by Whitley Stokes.²⁴ This was taken almost entirely from the very late fourteenth century *Leabhar Buidhe Leacáin* [The Yellow Book of Lecan] or Dublin, Trinity College MS 1318. The bodies of the sovereignty goddess and the ideal young king reflect the social taboos known as *gessi* or *gessa* that regulate not only the king's physical body and behavior, but also his ability to hold sovereignty. McCone explains that the *gessi* were as much taboos as they are social contracts or regulations over the sovereign's body and behavior so that he cannot abuse his authority. While there are some *gessi* that apply to all kings, such as the perfection of the body, there are often examples of taboos that are specific to the individual.²⁵ The early Irish legal exempla *Echtra Fergusa maic Léti* [The Saga of Fergus mac Léti] shows the consequences of a corrupt king who hides his disfigurement. This causes him to lose his sovereignty and his life. While the Irish sovereignty goddess has been read in terms of disease and only once before, this article was unsuccessful on several accounts. This chapter addresses these issues and reads the sovereignty goddess as a disabled, aged figure as well as a contemporary analogue to the English tradition for the first time. Reading the loathly lady figure in terms of age and impairment represents an important correction to the only previous attempt to read it in terms of diagnosing her with a specific, and unfounded, disease.

The second chapter not only expands the limited conversation surrounding John Gower as a disabled author, but it also argues that, while writing during his middle age, he consciously appropriates impairments associated with old age. This allows for him to represent himself as further along the Ages of Man *topos*. The appropriation enables him to claim both the wisdom

²⁴ Whitley Stokes, "The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón," *Revue Celtique* 24, (1903): 190-203.

²⁵ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (An Sagart: Maynooth, 1991), 136-137.

and the vulnerability associated with age, thereby allowing him to assert greater didactic significance for his writings while also potentially offering him the ability to appear innocuous in a politically charged time. In the “Tale of Florent”, the chivalric hero Florent is traditionally read as the character from whom Amans, Gower’s textual avatar, should learn. This chapter proposes that it is the Loathly Lady, as the other example of an aged and inappropriate lover, to whom Amans should look. This transforms our reading of the text by enabling us to understand a powerful connection between the “Tale of Florent” in Book I and the revelation of Amans’ aged status at the end of the final book, Book VIII.

The third chapter examines the Wife of Bath as an inappropriate lover and a parody of the idealized standard of women found in contemporary female conduct literature. This chapter goes against long-standing academic discourse, as established by Mary Carruthers, by reading the Loathly Lady as the Wife of Bath’s textual avatar. Each tale in *The Canterbury Tales* draws from one of the many popular literary genres enjoyed by the growing bourgeois and the English aristocracy. Conduct literature, or courtesy literature, consisted of didactic and instructional texts that taught the newly formed bourgeoisie how to behave in social settings. These texts were popular among readers, but thematically separated by the gender of their intended audience. Female conduct literature, such as *Le Ménagier de Paris* (1393) and *How the Good Wiff Taughte Hir Doughtir* (c.1350), were effectively instructional manuals framed around an older authority figure guiding the behavior of a young woman. Male conduct literature was quite different, even when written as a response to female conduct literature like *How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne* (c. 1430). Romance literature, which perpetuated the standards of behavior practiced by the popular social cult of chivalry can be read as male conduct literature. Roberta L. Krueger points

out that “many medieval [romantic] treatises imply that men were their target audience.”²⁶ Not only does this justify her claim that romances were often a form of male conduct literature used to teach the principles of chivalry by associating themselves with the actions of famous fictional knights, it makes clear that the restrictive standards set down in female conduct literature are equally unobtainable.²⁷ By reading parodic elements of female conduct literature in the “Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and male conduct literature in her “Tale,” a cohesive, deliberate, and undiscussed link can be established between her Prologue and Tale for the first time.

The fourth chapter is the first cohesive reading of Morgan le Fay as a Loathly Lady figure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While this idea was discussed in some detail by Lauren Chochinov in her master’s thesis, Morgan le Fay has only been termed a “loathly lady” once and in passing by Ellen Caldwell.²⁸ Through the application of disability studies, Morgan le Fay embodies the theory of spectral disability within the youthful chivalric court. Her behavior, her appearance, and her beheading game definitively links the text to the established Loathly Lady tradition. In this instance, Morgan le Fay is a bifurcated Loathly Lady. Although her body has been transformed through supernatural agency, it is a result of her own corrupt morality. The intertwined description of Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak shows the impairments and characteristics of the Loathly Lady in both her ugly and lovely states. Morgan le Fay’s identity is hidden by the ageism in the text; as she is not young and beautiful, she is not worth paying attention to. By reading Morgan le Fay as a bifurcated Loathly Lady, unprecedented significance

²⁶ Roberta L. Kreuger, “Introduction: Teach Your Children Well: Medieval Conduct Guides for Youths,” in *Medieval Conduct Literature: An Anthology of Vernacular Guides to Behaviour for Youths, with English Translations*, ed. Mark D. Johnston (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), ix–xxxiii, xvii.

²⁷ Kreuger, “Introduction,” xvii.

²⁸ Ellen M. Caldwell, “Brains or Beauty: Limited Sovereignty in the Loathly Lady Tales ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale,’ ‘Thomas of Ercloune,’ and ‘The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,’” in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore, Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 235–56, 245.

is given to the role of women within the text. Morgan le Fay is not able to test Gawain's morality herself, so she uses Lord and Lady Bertilak as her prosthesis. Multiple thematic elements, such as the Green Knight, the beheading game, and the sexual challenge link the text back to the Irish material as well as to the "Tale of Florent." While the concept of sovereignty is an important aspect of this text, the message has evolved. While Gawain has learned the importance of keeping his word, the overall message points to the impracticality of chivalric ideals and the importance of treating oneself with respect and forgiveness, as we would do another.

The fifth and final chapter looks at the cracks in King Arthur's sovereignty when Gawain encounters Dame Ragnelle and other Loathly figures in three of the Gawain Romances. By looking at a traditional Loathly Lady tale and two tales with Loathly figures, this chapter can provide an analysis of the evolution of the loathly tradition within the romance genre. This highlights the didactic nature of Arthurian romances, as well as the role of Gawain as an idealized knight who exhibits admirable behavior in an attainably flawed way. The application of spectral disability reveals the contemporary anxieties surrounding the evolving nature of sovereignty and class structure into something that is more mutable. Dame Ragnelle and the Carle both present challenges to aristocratic class standards through their unusual bodies and inappropriate behavior. Both Dame Ragnelle and the ghost of Guinevere's mother in *The Awntyrs off Arthur* are embodiments of spectral disability as seen through the chaos that is caused by their presence. Guinevere and the ghost of her mother is another example of a bifurcated Loathly Lady. In an episode that mirrors female conduct literature, the ghost returns to instruct her daughter. She advises Guinevere to change her sinful behavior so that she can become a better wife and queen. The ghost also warns of the threat to Arthur's sovereignty and the fall of Camelot, which occurs in part due to Guinevere's sinful behavior. The second half of *The*

Awntyrs includes an episode that is a direct parallel to the *Ragnelle* texts. Each of these texts contains Loathly figures which upset the normal order of the status quo in King Arthur's court, but the chaos that they cause is beneficial. Through their visual and behavioral disruption, these Loathly figures show how and where the chivalric court needs to improve in terms of behavior or morality. Instead of a birthright, nobility becomes a personal quality that is based on moral behavior.

By applying the novel theory of spectral disability to the established Loathly Lady motif, her didactic function becomes more apparent. Although this thesis is nominally focused on the Loathly Lady, the challenge that her body presents gives equal importance to the actions and the morality of the young male protagonist, who may one day hold sovereignty. As spectral disability is applicable to all humans regardless of age, class, or gender, so too is the Loathly Lady's moralizing message. In these tales, the Loathly Lady teaches the reader as well. We must learn from her not only how to treat the elderly, the disabled, and the Other but how to be a good person. This challenge presented by their bodies is largely rooted in the stigmatization of disease, poverty, and disfigurement. Multiple historical factors occurred during the medieval and pre-modern periods which contributed to this stigmatization, including plague, economic crisis, and malnutrition which forced insolvent individuals to the margins of society where they were treated with suspicion.²⁹ This marginalized group, which included women similar in appearance, impairment, and economic standing to the Loathly Lady, were dependent on charity. Irene Metzler points out that understanding the position of those less fortunate and offering mendication was a way for the more fortunate to obtain salvation within an inequitable social

²⁹ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 34.

order.³⁰ As a result of population growth and the development of urban life, the number of impoverished people increased. People with ugly bodies, known as *abiectus*, were both poor and disabled. While their impairments were often met with distrust due to the omnipresence of transmutable diseases and the contemporary context of mutilation as a form of criminal punishment, their disabled bodies justified both begging and wide-spread scorn from the able-bodied public.³¹ The Loathly Lady tales reflect not only this scorn and societal anxiety, but also the need for compassion towards the real-world individuals who suffered in similar ways.

The consideration of the medieval tradition of the Loathly Lady in this thesis engages with several relevant concerns including anxieties about social movements and class structure, sovereignty and assimilation, courtly behavior, and spectral disability. Over the course of five chapters, both the physical body of the Loathly Lady and the moral implications of the reactions of those around her will be presented as a slightly varying but consistent commentary on contemporary attitudes towards morality and mortality. This thesis presents the Irish material as an analogous Loathly Lady tale. It also reclaims the Irish sovereignty goddess and the English Loathly figures from “comparative scholarly neglect.”³² As the Loathly Lady has many forms, so too do these chapters. Each chapter takes a perspective as unique as the Loathly Lady which it analyzes.

³⁰ Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 157. Cited by Juárez-Almedros, *Bodies*, 35.

³¹ Juárez-Almedros, *Bodies*, 35.

³² S. Elizabeth Passmore, “Introduction,” in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), xix.

Chapter I: Disability, Disfigurement, and Sovereignty in Irish Saga

Introduction

There is a long but unexamined relationship between disability and sovereignty in Irish saga. Loathliness has both cultural and moral implications in Old Irish kingship tales. This is evident in the *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, in which the Loathly Lady first appears as an Irish sovereignty goddess.¹ It is a composite text about Niall of the Nine Hostages [Níall Noígíallach], his early life and accession to the kingship of Ireland. The connection between the Irish and the English Loathly Lady traditions has long been accepted by scholars such as S. Elizabeth Passmore, Patricia Lysaght, and Lorraine Kochanske Stock. The specific nature of this connection is discussed in few academic texts, the most recent being Passmore's chapter.² This absence of analysis is in part due to the linguistic inaccessibility of the original Irish texts. The standardized English translation which is used by scholars who lack a working knowledge of Old Irish comes from a manuscript that is contemporaneous to the English Loathly Lady tales.³ While the sovereignty myth has been approached only as a potential source for the tradition, no one has recognized the text's significance as an analogue. This is significant because the Irish text reflects contemporary anxieties as English and Irish conceptions of political sovereignty as well as disability.

¹ On the figure of the sovereignty goddess, see Sjoestedt (1949), Mac Cana (1958), Bhreathnach (1982), Lysaght (1986), Herbert (1992), and Eichhorn-Mulligan (2006).

² S. Elizabeth Passmore, "Through the Counsel of a Lady: The Irish and English Loathly Lady Tales and the 'Mirror for Princes' Genre," in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. Susan Carter and S. Elizabeth Passmore (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 3–41.

³ Tom O'Donovan, "Echtra Mac nEchach Muigmedóin," Irish Sagas Online, accessed September 19, 2023, <https://iso.ucc.ie/Echtra-mac/Echtra-mac-index.html>.

Although the *Echtra* differs from the English motif, several key elements including the body of the Loathly Lady, her transformation, the ideal young nobleman, and the importance of sovereignty remain consistent. It is necessary to view the sovereignty goddess as an embodiment of sovereignty within an exclusively medieval Irish understanding due to the unique relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic, which are governed by moral restrictions known as *gessi* or *gessa*.⁴ Most studies that do consider the Irish sources adopt a limited methodology that focuses on the way the English stories modify the plot, without understanding the importance of broader contextual issues such as the focus on the physical and moral perfectibility of the king-candidate in the tradition. While the intact physical male body is a standard requirement for sovereignty in early Ireland, disability studies has never been applied to early Irish saga. This chapter seeks to address this gap in scholarship. This contribution brings a more precise awareness of the language, new insights into undiscussed analogues, and an original application of disability studies. By applying this methodology, new insight into the Irish material and a new context for understanding how these ideas are transformed in the English context develops.

To reach this goal, the chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section is a necessary explanation of the complicated nature and history of sovereignty unique to medieval Ireland. The standards and practices of sovereignty were different from English and continental practices. An analysis of the turbulent environment in which the original Loathly Lady tale was composed and later transcribed makes clear that the *Echtra* and figure of Niall of the Nine Hostages were political propaganda for the Uí Néill, also known as the O'Neill, family. This important Irish family grounded their right to sovereignty in Ireland in the biography of their

⁴ eDIL s.v. *geis*

founding father, who was blessed by the sovereignty goddess. To understand the sovereignty goddess and the practice of sovereignty that she represents, it is imperative to approach the texts with a clear understanding of the nature of political sovereignty in a medieval Irish context as well as the historic environment in which the text was transcribed.

The second section looks at the body of the Loathly Lady in the *Echtra* and the relationship between disfigurement and sovereignty in Irish saga. This section applies disability studies to the Irish Loathly Lady for the first time in order to show not only the description of an Othered figure in Irish saga, but also to analyze her as an analogue for the English Loathly Ladies. In the *Echtra*, the Loathly Lady is not simply a didactic figure whose loathsome body provides a morality test for the would-be king, but rather she is sovereignty itself. Having established the brutal nature of sovereignty in the previous section, the challenge presented by her body is a logical test to judge the ability of the king to successfully rule over Ireland. Her body exhibits the opposite physical characteristics required of the Irish king through the *gessi*, or taboos, which regulate both the body physical and the body politic. This also establishes her as an aged rather than a diseased figure.

The third section expands upon the role of disability in Irish saga by extending the analysis to the body of the king. To do so, it is necessary to examine a sovereignty text in which the king suffers from a facial disfigurement. This is a violation of the *gessi* that grant him sovereignty. This Loathly Lady tale will be compared to a contemporary text that is used as a legal exemplum for the practice of sovereignty. This text, *Echtra Fergusa maic Léti* [The Saga of Fergus mac Léti], is not a Loathly Lady tale. This tale shows the relationship between disability and sovereignty as applied to Irish law, thus showing contemporary understanding of that relationship as practiced by medieval Irish society. Through these two texts, it becomes clear that

the disfigured body of the sovereignty goddess is not the only obstacle to the king's sovereignty, it is also his own spectral disability. If he should become disfigured or disabled, he will lose his sovereignty.

Looking specifically at a kingship tale that does not include the Loathly Lady will allow for a wider application of the disability lens to demonstrate that disfigurement is a social as well as a physical construct. The king's sovereignty was directly tied to his physical body, which was regulated by legal taboos or *gessi*. The *gessi* regulated the standards of the king's body and behavior. If he should break one, he would lose his sovereignty and most likely his life. In the third section, disability methodologies borrowed from work done on Icelandic sagas and other relevant studies will address issues of disability and gender in relation to the Loathly Lady form of the sovereignty goddess. This proves that the disabled body is a challenge to political sovereignty in the Irish literary context much as the Loathly Lady's disfigured body is a challenge to the personal sovereignty of the protagonist in the English material. The Irish sovereignty goddess' aged body and the facial disfigurement of Fergus mac Léti qualifies them as aberrant characters. Lois Bragg, who has applied disability studies to Old Norse saga, define an aberrant character as someone who is socially othered due to an abnormal physical characteristic.⁵ By applying their methodology to the Irish source material, the social and political ramifications of disability in Irish saga literature and culture can be seen for the first time. This unique contribution to the understanding of the Loathly Lady motif allows for a more profound appreciation of the evolution of sovereignty and the didactic messages in the English tales.

⁵ Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), xi.

I. Establishing Irish Sovereignty: Connotations of Counsel and Kingship

Early Irish literature is one of the first vernacular literatures in Western Europe. The period is typically dated as beginning in either the eighth or ninth centuries and ending in the fifteenth century. The literary genres focused on indigenous storytelling, myths, and historical narratives that were predominantly biographies of warriors and kings.⁶ The literary tradition that developed produced an untold number of manuscripts which has yet to be definitively catalogued. The collection of Early Irish manuscripts held solely by the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin is estimated to be around fifteen hundred in number.⁷ Many of these texts reflect the political threat of the English king's imposed sovereignty over a fractured Ireland and the violent difficulties of succession in an uncertain society. Political sovereignty was challenged in various ways, which led to the development of the sovereignty goddess as a recurring figure in Irish saga. This can also account for the importance of sovereignty as a predominant theme in the medieval period as a form of nostalgia for when Ireland was an independent sovereign nation. Even though the definition of sovereignty evolves through the English Loathly Lady tales to be of a more interpersonal nature, it remains a central concept of the motif. The Irish Loathly Lady tale, the *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* [The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon], follows the same pattern and motif used by Gower and Chaucer but in a different cultural context and with a different definition of sovereignty.

⁶ Paul Russel, "'What Was Best of Every Language': The Early History of the Irish Language," in *A New History of Ireland: Prehistoric and Early Ireland: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 405–450.

⁷ Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, *The Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy: A Brief Introduction*, ed. Siobhán Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2003), 1.

The *Echtra* is a political text that reflects the contemporary medieval challenges and anxieties surrounding sovereignty in Ireland. It is first attributed in the Book of Leinster (Dublin, Trinity College MS 1339) to Cuan O’Lothchain (d. 1024 CE), a famous poet-scholar from Westmeath. It survives in two forms: a poem and a prose version. The text can be found in no less than nine surviving Early Irish manuscripts including the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* (Dublin, Trinity College MS 1339) (fac. P 33b) and the twelfth-century *Book of Glendalough* (Bodleian Library MS. Rawl. B. 502) (fac., p 138 a). The prose version is found in the incredibly important fourteenth-century *Book of Ballymote* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12) (265a) and in the very late fourteenth-century *Yellow Book of Lecan* (Dublin, Trinity College MS 1318) (Unit: cols 573–958) also known as YBL. The standard English translation was done by Whitley Stokes in 1903.⁸ He uses the *Yellow Book of Lecan* almost entirely, with some variants from BB, the Book of Ballymote, for his translation. This is the version that is accessible to students and scholars who have knowledge of Old or Middle Irish, as well as those who read the English translation. It establishes the key elements of the English Loathly Lady motif: a young aristocratic hero encounters an extremely ugly old woman in a wooded setting; they have a sexual exchange which causes her to transform into a beautiful woman. In this instance, she is not a human woman but rather the goddess of sovereignty. As the personification of sovereignty, she grants the hero and his descendants’ sovereignty over Ireland.

The *Yellow Book of Lecan*, which Stokes used almost exclusively for his standardized version and translation, is dated between 1391 and 1401. This means that the Irish Loathly Lady tale, the *Echtra*, is contemporaneous to both the “Tale of Florent” in the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1380-1390) and “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400). The creation

⁸ Whitley Stokes, trans., “The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón,” *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903): 190–203.

of the *Yellow Book of Lecan* is not definitively connected to the descendants of Niall of the Nine Hostage, the Uí Néil family. This name is anglicized as the O'Neill and meaning "of Niall." However, the creation of the manuscript, which contains the legendary biographies of Ireland's most important kings, is inherently political. The inclusion of this text occurs after O'Neil's questionable usurpation of sovereignty in Ulster following the Burke Civil War (1333-1338). It also justifies their contemporaneously blossoming relationship with the unpopular English government in Dublin, as well as their later military uprisings against the English rule.⁹ The dates and political environment of the *Echtra* is significant because Lysaght, Stock, Passmore, and anyone dealing with the Irish Loathly Lady tale have only addressed the Irish material as a potential source for the English Loathly Lady tradition. The narrative is not just a potential source for the English material, but it is also an analogue. The *Echtra* deals with the same social and political anxieties as expressed in the English Loathly Lady tradition at the same time but in a different way.

The *Yellow Book of Lecan* contains the most well studied version of the *Echtra* as that is the standardized translation. The *Yellow Book of Lecan* is a composite manuscript containing the Ulster Cycle [*an Rúraíocht*]. This is a large collection of medieval Irish historic legends and sagas focusing on the Ulaid, the people of Ulster. While the stories preserved within the manuscripts are considerably more ancient, the surviving manuscripts date between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The *Yellow Book of Lecan* was written partially in 1391 and completed by 1401. The Loathly Lady motif is the center of the *Echtra* narrative, which Maud Joynt sees as congruent with *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, the "Tale of Florent" in the *Confessio Amantis*, and

⁹ Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ireland in 250 Episodes* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009), 79-81.

Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" in *The Canterbury Tales*.¹⁰ While Joynt only mentions this as a passing statement in her 1910 translation of the Rawlinson version, it establishes the tradition that the Irish sovereignty goddess is the earliest of the Loathly Ladies and thus influenced the English tradition. She fails to acknowledge that a version of the *Echtra* exists in a manuscript that is analogous to these English texts.

The hero of the text is Niall of the Nine Hostages. He was the son of the titular character and a historic figure. He ruled as High King of Ireland 379-405 AD. Certain biographical elements, such as his parentage and family, are documented as historically accurate. He did not immediately succeed his father but was later chosen over a half-brother. Little mention is made of him in the Irish annals and the date of his death is conflicted within the space of a century. It is established that he died before halfway through the fifth century.¹¹ What is known of his biography is inflated by the propaganda of his descendants, most notably his reputation as a High King of Ireland, which did not conceptually exist until the ninth century.¹² His legendary biography stems from multiple texts, namely the eleventh-century *Echtra* and "The Death of Niall of the Nine Hostages," the "Roll of Kings" section of the eleventh-century *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*.¹³ It is also found in Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* [Annals of the Four Masters] (1634).¹⁴ Niall's legendary biography spans the centuries and maintains a prominent place in Irish cultural identity, as does the *Echtra*.

¹⁰ Maud Joynt, trans., "Echtra Mac Ehdach Mugmedóin," *Ériu* 4 (1910): 91–111, 91.

¹¹ Kathleen Hughes, "The Church in Irish Society, 400–800," in *A New History of Ireland Vol I: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 306–308.

¹² Francis J Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London: Batsford, 1973).

¹³ Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339.

¹⁴ Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MSS C iii 3: Cat. No. 1220; 23 P 6: Cat. No. 687; 23 P 7: Cat. No. 688 A.D. 1632-36 Paper (folios in vellum in 23 P 6) C iii 3: 28cm; 23 P 6: 35cm; 23 P 7: 35cm.

Echtra mac nEchach Muimedóin translates as “The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón,” but it focuses on the early years of Niall of the Nine Hostages. Eochaid Mugmedón had four sons with his queen, Mongfind. He had a fifth son with Cairenn Chasdub, an enslaved foreign princess. The queen was jealous of this and attempted to cause Cairenn to miscarry. She gave birth to Niall while she was drawing water from a well. Terrified of the queen, she left the baby by the well to die. The baby was rescued and brought up by Torna, a legendary Irish poet. Niall later returned to Tara to save his mother from the evil Queen Mongfind. He was welcomed in the court and became the most popular prince among the nobles. The Irish line of succession did not pass directly from father to firstborn son, so the queen saw Niall’s popularity as a threat to her own sons’ future kingship. She demanded that her husband name one of her sons as his successor. King Eochaid passed this on to the druid Sithchenn, who devised a morality test between the five brothers. Niall was named the victor, but the queen refused to accept this decision. The druid then sent the five brothers hunting. After a long day, they each individually searched for water. In the woods, they each found the same well. Next to it was an ugly old woman. She offered each of them a drink of water in exchange for a kiss. They refused in disgust. One of them gave her a small peck, but it was not enough to satisfy her. Niall, however, satisfied the hag with enthusiasm. She then transformed into a beautiful queen-like woman who granted him not only water, but also sovereignty over Ireland and advice on how to be a good king.

The Irish sovereignty goddess is the earliest incarnation of the Loathly Lady, but the version of her that scholars have ready access to in both Irish and English is not a source for the English tradition. It has yet to be acknowledged that the creation of the *Yellow Book of Lecan* (1391-1401) is contemporaneous with the *Confessio Amantis* (c.1380-1390) and *The Canterbury*

Tales (1387-1400). These texts reflect opposing perspectives of the same anxieties concerning political and social sovereignty. Conversely, the Irish version speaks to the desire for sovereignty that sparked the friction between English authority and the questionable actions of Niall's descendants. An important difference between the English and the Irish tradition is the contextualization of sovereignty. The English Loathly Lady tales deal with issues of sovereignty in an established courtly setting. The Irish text reflects the still militant environment and battle for political sovereignty over Ireland. While the English tradition deals with concepts of sovereignty that were heavily influenced by chivalry and continental standards of rule, the practice and standards of medieval Irish kingship and sovereignty were very different.

Requirements for medieval Irish kingship were divided into three specific categories: genealogical qualification, political competition, and *febas*, personal excellence.¹⁵ Prophecy was a tool often used by Irish poets to convey political approval, even though this was more likely an early form of propaganda, as exemplified by the *Echtra*. Passmore interprets prophecy as an extension of the earlier importance of counsel in relation to sovereignty, which are exemplified in the *Audacht Morainn*.¹⁶ This text survives in multiple manuscripts, including the *Book of Leinster* and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*. It dates to the seventh century, following the format of a *fili* or poet providing counsel to a king of Ireland. Kim McCone qualifies the *fili* or *filid* were an independent social class.¹⁷ Passmore further explains that they were an elite form of poet-advisors which were directly employed by Irish kings; while John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer worked closely with the Ricardian and Lancastrian courts, they were never in the direct employ

¹⁵ T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90-92.

¹⁶ Passmore, "Counsel," 4, see also S. Elizabeth Passmore, "The Loathly Lady Transformed: A Literary and Cultural Analysis of the Medieval Irish and English Hag-Beauty Tales" (PhD Diss., University of Connecticut, 2004), 66-120.

¹⁷ McCone, *Pagan*, 19.

of the crown.¹⁸ This text details the characteristics that a king should exhibit, including *fir flaithe*, which Passmore translates as "ruler's truth."¹⁹ This conceptualizes the king's behavior into something that is either good or bad for his subjects and his kingdom.²⁰ A ruler's poor judgement or actions that violated the *gessi* which regulated his sovereignty and behavior would lead to political instability and chaos for Ireland.

Social instability is likely the cause for what scholars have emphasized as the "conservatism" of medieval Irish literature. In his book, McCone quotes Byrne to showcase the paradoxical contributions of Irish kingship literature that "contributed a refreshing current of intellectual liveliness and religious idealism."²¹ This presents Irish kingship literature as a clear example of the interplay between Christian ideology and pagan influences.²² The interplay between these influences is maintained throughout the English material. The Loathly Lady's connection to Irish kingship literature lends her a greater sense of authority as well as "otherness." In kingship literature, the sovereignty and safety of Ireland depended on the perfection of the king's body and behavior as ascribed to these ideals. This anxiety over sovereignty reflects the historical context in which the sagas were written.

In the late fourteenth century, as the smaller kingdoms within Ireland were collapsing due to English military conquests, the very concept of sovereignty was under threat. In 1399, a letter was sent by the Irish Council (established to maintain English rule on Irish soil) to the new king

¹⁸ Passmore, "Counsel," 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ For further information, see Damian McManus, *Seachtain Na hOidhreacht/Heritage Week 2019, YouTube* (TCD Roinn na Gaeilge, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNzZF_rkBsQ.

²¹ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: Maynooth Monographs, 1991), 107. Citing Byrne, *Irish*, 12.

²² McCone, *Pagan*, 107.

of England, Henry IV.²³ This letter detailed the lack of financial and military resources available to maintain English sovereignty in Ireland. The O'Neill family played a major role in attempting to overthrow English forces while simultaneously accepting sovereignty from the Anglo-Norman government in Dublin. Brian Blacker explains in his thesis that the letter details how the O'Neill family had raised a considerable force and were prepared for rebellion against the English. The family were sovereign kings of Tír Eoghain, an area in the Ulster region in the north of Ireland from 1232-1616. Their lands were unwillingly merged with the Kingdom of Ireland under English rule, which sparked centuries of military attempts to regain sovereignty.²⁴ Henry IV responded to this gathering storm by appointing his second son, thirteen-year-old Thomas of Lancaster, as lieutenant of Ireland on 27 June 1401.²⁵ In September 1400, Owain Glyndwr had asked for Irish support from the O'Neills for their own rebellion against the English in Wales.²⁶ Little documentation of English authority over Ireland survives from the 1390s as much of it was destroyed in a devastating fire at the Four Courts in Dublin on June 30th, 1922. Ironically, this was part of the Irish Civil War by which independence from England was finally obtained in the twentieth century.²⁷ While sovereignty is a central element in both the English and the Irish Loathly Lady tales, the Irish Loathly Lady is a sovereignty goddess who reflects the nostalgia for an independent sovereign Ireland during a politically unstable period.

²³ James Graves, ed., *A Roll of the Proceedings of the King's Council in Ireland: For a Portion of the Sixteenth Year of the Reign of Richard the Second. A.D. 1392-1393, with an Appendix* (London: Longman, 1877), 261-269.

²⁴ Brian Blacker, "Thomas of Lancaster, Duke of Clarence 1388-1421: The Consolidation of the Lancastrian Dynasty" (Thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1997), 22.

²⁵ David Beresford, "Thomas of Lancaster," *Thomas of Lancaster | Dictionary of Irish Biography*, accessed September 16, 2023, <https://www.dib.ie/biography/thomas-lancaster-a8514>.

²⁶ W. E. Vaughan and Art Cosgrove, *A New History of Ireland, Volume II: Medieval Ireland 1169-1534* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 570.

²⁷ Bardon, *History*, 79-81.
Ibid., 885.

Literature from the medieval period reflects the gradual shift in the social conception of kingship and sovereignty in Ireland. The established Irish tradition of an "over-king/ client-king" gradually gave way to the continental ideals of sovereignty which revolved around the feudal system.²⁸ The claims of sovereignty by the O'Neill were fragile at this time. Themes of sovereignty, especially the maintenance or ordained nature of political sovereignty reflected a conservatism on the part of the Irish kings and their poet-advisors as well as anti-English sentiment. The emergence of the sovereignty goddess reflects this greater cultural anxiety. By looking to the founding of the O'Neill dynasty in the *Echtra*, Niall emerges as an ideal king figure whose descendants, including the current would-be king, were blessed by the sovereignty goddess. Through understanding the wider historical context in which the *Echtra* was transcribed in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, the wider political and cultural connotations of the donation of sovereignty to Niall extends to the contemporary political climate. The legendary or fictional history casts the O'Neill family as heroes who were protecting their ancestral claim to the sovereignty of Ireland, which legitimized their military actions and uprising against the English overlords or the acceptance of gifts of sovereignty from them.

The inclusion of these elements in both the *Echtra* and *The Saga of Fergus mc Léti* texts show a practical application of a didactic text pertaining to political sovereignty and kingship in Irish society. The text survives in the late fifteenth, possibly early sixteenth century composite manuscript (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337) and the early sixteenth-century Harley 432 (London, British Library, MS Harley 432). Both R. Thurneysen and Neil McLeod suggest that

²⁸ Passmore, "Counsel," 4. See also T. M. Charles-Edwards, T. M. "A Contract Between King and People in Early Medieval Ireland: 'Críth Gablach' on Kingship." *Peritia* 8 (1994): 107–19. 107-108.

Fergus was composed by jurists specifically to teach the legal practice of sovereignty.²⁹ McLeod writes that the plot-twists and deliberately highlighted aspects of the law show the necessity of restraint.³⁰ Ariana Malthaner views this as a logical conclusion, as the text has "the necessary characteristics to conform to others in the tradition and that could have earned its place within the repertoire of a *fili*."³¹ The story focuses on the corruption of sovereignty, the breaking of regulatory *gessi*, and the dangers of corrupt advisors. In this text, King Fergus breaks *gessi* by swimming where he was told not to. While swimming, he encounters a sea monster that was so terrifying the Fergus' face becomes permanently disfigured by his horror. This facial disfigurement is not only a sign of his cowardice, but it also violated the *gessi* stating that a sovereign's body must be perfect. Instead of removing his sovereignty, his *fili* hid the disfigurement from him and his court. In doing so, Fergus was unable to be a good king. Eventually, he did find out that he was disfigured and killed the slave who told him. He then confronts and kills the sea monster but loses his life.

This text highlights the significance of the *fili* as advisors as well as their self-proposed importance within the politically turbulent environment in which the narratives were recorded. Passmore points out that the Loathly Lady ultimately functions as an advisor to Niall.³² This understanding lends her greater influence within the *Echtra* as she chooses who has the right to have sovereignty over herself and therefore Ireland. *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* maintains a didactic function while existing fully as an example of Irish saga and Irish kingship literature

²⁹ R. Thurneysen, "‘‘Allerlei Keltisches [1. Präverbales Toich Im Irischen? 2. Air. Plur. Nadmen; 3. Air. Dīthchus; 4. Mir. Melle; 5. Kymr. Proest; 6. Bai Side a Ngiall La Laegaire: AL III 28; 7. Göttin Medb?],’’ *Zeitschrift Für Celtische Philologie* 18 (1930): 100–110, 103-104.

Neil McLeod, "Fergus Mac Léti and the Law," *Ériu* 61, no. 1 (2011): 1–28, 12.

³⁰ McLeod, "Fergus," 1.

³¹ Ariana Malthaner, "The Intersection of Literature and Law: The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti," *Studia Celtica Fennica* XVI (2019): 90–106, 95.

³² Passmore, "Counsel," 4.

because it shows the consequence of a king and his advisors who go against the regulatory taboos or *gessi* so that they can maintain power even though it is not morally right. The *Fergus* text is not simply a historical biography, like the *Echtra*, but rather a commentary on a law text that shows the repercussions of a king and his advisor's abuse of political sovereignty. The legal version of this text survives in two manuscripts: the mid-eighth century "Old Irish glossing of the *Senchas Már*," which is found in the Dublin, Trinity College MS 1337. This manuscript forms the basis for Binchy's standardized translation and edition, which McLeod acknowledges is incomplete.³³ McLeod writes that this manuscript forms part of the commentary on the Old Irish law-tract *Cethairslicht Athgabálae*, which includes the *Senchas Már*. *Fergus* is one of the opening texts: "So, the Saga of Fergus mac Léti occurs right at the beginning of the opening tract of the greatest legal compilation in the history of the Brehon Laws."³⁴ This means that issues of disfigurement and its relationship to sovereignty and counsel are at the forefront of the earliest Irish legal practices. Issues of disfigurement in kingship literature are often not only tied to bad judgement on the part of the king, but also on that of his counselors.

Counsel is often directly associated with prophecy and is also a central element of king stories. This reflects not only the moral obligation of a good king to listen to his advisors, but also the changing nature of political sovereignty, as well as the evolving role of the poet-historian in Irish society.³⁵ Passmore writes that it is through the sovereignty goddess' instruction that the protagonist of the kingship tales obtain kingship "as the poets implicitly demonstrate contemporary eleventh- and twelfth century- political requirements for rulership."³⁶ In the

³³ Passmore, "Counsel," 4.

³⁴ McLeod, "Fergus," 2.

³⁵ Passmore, "Counsel," 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

Echtra, Niall's kingship is predicted even though he is an illegitimate youngest son and thus the least logical choice to assume the kingship upon his father's death. Torna the poet predicts that:

"rusfith ria re tuir. / morfaiter maigi, / srainfiter geill, / firfiter catha . . . / secht mbliadna fichet fallamnaigis Herenn, / bid uad Herin co brath"³⁷

["plains will be enlarged / hostages will be carried off, / battles will be waged . . . / for twenty-seven years / ruler of Ireland. / And from him there will be a portion forever"]³⁸

And after Niall comes of age:

"ba he rad fear n-Erenn andsin, bid he Niall bus ri tareis a athar"³⁹

["the men of Ireland were saying then that Niall would be king after his father"]⁴⁰

It is a combination of noble blood and nobly performed deeds that allows for the protagonist to obtain sovereignty in the mythical warrior society. Given his youth and illegitimacy, he seems least likely to ascend to the throne. Nonetheless, through his treatment of the sovereignty goddess in her hag-form, he proves himself to be more suited than his elder half-brothers.

The English Loathly Ladies differ from the Irish sovereignty goddess in the sense that they are categorized as human women, whereas the Irish sovereignty goddess is the personification of the abstract concept of Irish sovereignty. Like the king of Ireland, her identity and her power are determined by her physical appearance. In a demonstration of his capacity to satisfy the requirements of sovereignty, Niall satisfies her body in its loathly state. This action taken by Niall proves that he is the right man to be king. While Passmore focuses on the Loathly

³⁷ Stokes, "Echtra," 192.

³⁸ John Carey, "Tara and the Supernatural," in *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*, ed. Edel Bhrethnach (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 33-34. Translating Stokes.

³⁹ Stokes, "Echtra," 192.

⁴⁰ Carey, "Tara," 34. Translating Stokes.

Lady as a counselor in the English material, the Irish version of the Loathly Lady is sovereignty personified; her deformed body represents the repulsive challenge of sovereignty when a new king first encounters it, and the beauty that sovereignty can assume once a good king satisfies her needs. The English texts which appear in this thesis all present the Loathly Lady as a guide to the protagonist, who helps him to overcome a challenge through good advice. In the Irish tradition, it is loathliness, or an aberrant body, that becomes a test to the king's worthiness of sovereignty. In this vein, the Irish Loathly Lady does not initially offer transformative advice, but rather a transformative challenge.

Niall not only transforms the sovereignty goddess into an idealized beauty, but he also transforms himself into an ideal sovereign. This is congruent with Passmore's interpretation that the Irish Loathly Lady tales show the sovereignty goddess instructing the protagonist as to how he can assume kingship.⁴¹ His qualifications are innate characteristics which are demonstrated throughout the course of the tale, rather than learned through a didactic lesson. This is important in terms of the English tradition, too; in some texts, the challenge reveals the true nature of the protagonist, as in the "Tale of Florent," while in some it transforms their character, such as the Knight in "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" Niall's qualifications are in part due to the influence of prophecy in the Irish saga tradition. This prophecy is also propaganda that promotes the sovereignty of the O'Neill dynasty, which was questionable at this time. Following the Burke/de Burgh Civil War (1333-1338), the O'Neill assumed lands in Ulster that had belonged to the Burke family as they had a cordial relationship with the Anglo-Norman authorities for the

⁴¹ Passmore, "Counsel," 3. She references Proinsias Mac Cana, "Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature," *Etudes Celtiques* 7, no. 1 (1955): 76-114.

foreseeable future.⁴² Comparatively, T. F. O'Rahilly argues that Niall and his sons were responsible for the breakup of the ancient kingdom of Ulster.⁴³ The sovereignty goddess promises sovereignty to generations of Niall's descendants: “dot shíol go bráth uas gach claind/ is é in fáth fíor fá a nabraim. [Thy seed over every race forever/ is true prophecy I say]” (15). To this effect, she takes on the role of a *fili* and justifies the O'Neill sovereignty over what until recently were Burke lands. The qualifications and requirements of kingship relate to the theme of counsel within the Irish material due to the significant role of the advisors within the texts. These texts would have been composed by the *fili* or poets who served as advisors to the king.

To maintain sovereignty and satisfy the requirements of his advisors, the High King of Ireland had to maintain a level of physical as well as moral perfection. The body of the king was directly related to the body politic, as he embodied the state of his political sovereignty. Niall of the Nine Hostages is a shining example of this standard and the satisfaction of the supernatural qualifications for kingship. *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* shows what happens when a king's advisors are corrupt, and the king breaks the *gessi* which govern his sovereignty. While the *Echtra* justifies the political significance of the O'Neill family, *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* shows the interpretation of the historic practice of sovereignty in an important early Irish law text. In comparing these two texts, the didactic implications of bodily disfigurement become directly tied to political sovereignty. Whereas the king must be physically and morally perfect, the sovereignty goddess is the exact opposite. As the original Loathly Lady, her hideous body

⁴² Evidence of this relationship can be found in British Library, Harley MS 5885 (N.L.I. Dublin POS no. 1426) and British Library, Harley MS 6096 (N.L.I. Dublin POS no. 1427) as well as Henry Sidney, “Sir Henry Sidney's Memoir of His Government of Ireland 1583,” *Ulster Journal of Archeology*, 1, 3 (1855): 33–52, 85-109-336–57, 46, Footnote no. 6.

⁴³ T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2010), 222-223.

presents a challenge to the protagonist. In this instance, the reward for satisfying the Loathly Lady is not a marriage to a physical woman, but a metaphorical marriage between the king and Ireland. Although the sovereignty goddess does physically transform from a hag to a beautiful goddess, it is Niall who is transformed into a king as he is able to hold sovereignty.

II: Facing Deformity and the Loathly Lady

Examples of sovereignty vary between the English and Irish Loathly Lady tales. Both variations show that kingship and noble birth are not enough to retain sovereignty. Sovereignty must be earned and maintained. It is a combination of noble blood and nobly performed deeds that allows for the protagonist to obtain sovereignty. The Loathly Lady trope highlights the repulsive body of the character as observed through the eyes of the conventionally handsome protagonist. Like her English counterparts, the Irish sovereignty goddess is hideously ugly. Lengthy descriptions of her grotesque misshapen form are consistent to those found in the English Loathly Lady tales. Very few academic studies link the sovereignty goddess' non-normative body to the concept of disability. This chapter creates a new dialog between the existing but limited work of Old Norse scholars and Old Irish scholars by reading the Irish sovereignty goddess as an "aberrant" or disabled figure. Whereas Ármann Jakobsson et al. use the Irish material to support their disability lens in the Old Norse material, this section proposes to do the inverse.⁴⁴ By engaging in their discussion, the connection between the body of the Loathly Lady and the body politic in the Irish sagas can shed light on the yet undiscussed role of disability in a medieval Irish context.

⁴⁴ Ármann Jakobsson et al., "Disability before Disability: Mapping the Uncharted in the Medieval Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 92, no. 4 (2020): 440–60.

Aberrant figures exist even in the most liberal and inclusive environments. A notable challenge in connecting disability studies to Medieval literature is the perception of these outcasts. Based on this, the Loathly Lady is a didactic figure who teaches the reader not to regard these figures with "fear, scorn, or impatience."⁴⁵ This can be seen in a direct quote in which the sovereignty goddess compares her own loathly appearance to the evolution of sovereignty under a good king.⁴⁶ The sovereignty goddess' revelation shows the esoteric rewards that can be gained from positively interacting with disabled individuals not just within saga, but also in daily life as a sign of personal nobility. The implication is that a noble person should treat all disabled people with kindness. While she is in her loathly form, there is nothing to indicate her supernatural significance.

The sovereignty goddess is recognized as having three variations within Irish saga. These three are each in some way disabled or marginalized and are only cured when the rightful king proves his capacity for sovereignty. This reflects curative ideas of physical deformity that contrast with ideas of class and mental disability, some of which are also relevant to the later texts examined in this thesis. Firstly, sovereignty goddess is a Loathly Lady, "an ugly hag transformed into a beautiful lady by the embraces of the hero destined to become king."⁴⁷ In other texts, she is mentally incapacitated and returned to a balanced state: "a wild wandering female who is restored to sanity and beauty through union with the rightful king."⁴⁸ Finally, she can be a socially displaced princess "brought up among cowherds and elevated again to her due dignity through marriage to the king ..."⁴⁹ In historic practice as well as Irish kingship literature,

⁴⁵ Bragg, *Oedipus*, xiii.

⁴⁶ Stokes, "Adventures," 200.

⁴⁷ Mac Cana, "Aspects," 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

women could not be a sovereign even though sovereignty itself was gendered female.⁵⁰

Sovereignty over Ireland passed to a king via *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage. This concept existed throughout Irish kingship literature, extending well into the poetry of the eighteenth century.⁵¹ This gift of sovereignty and marriage is also seen in the climax of the Loathly Lady trope.

As Máire Herbert interprets figures such as Queen Medb as a humanized embodiment of the sovereignty goddess, so too can the Loathly Lady be interpreted as a more accessible or applicable embodiment of sovereignty to the situation within her tale.⁵² As with the sacred marriage in the Irish material, the protagonist must obey and satisfy the requirements of the sovereignty figure. Even in her more earthly guise, the Loathly Lady still teaches didactic lessons of sovereignty to royal figures that any (noble) man may emulate. This difference may be due to the various relationships that the authors of the text had to sovereignty; in theory, the Irish kingship literature was written by the *fili*, the poets, who were in the direct employ of the sovereign of Ireland. Each variation of the *Echtra* reflects the contemporary social anxieties surrounding sovereignty in Ireland.

The Irish Loathly Lady is given a lengthy description in all versions of the *Echtra*. In the standardized edition taken from the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, the entirety of Section 11, twenty-one lines, describes the non-normative aspects of her body. She is black from head to toe: “co mba duibhithir gual/ cech n-alt ocus cach n-aigi di/ o mullach co talmain.” She has grisly, long grey hair like a horse’s tail: “Ba samalta fri herboll fiadeich/ in mong glas gaisidech.” Her green teeth

⁵⁰ “Women were considered to be legally incompetent, alongside children, criminals and the mentally disabled.” Hilary Hogan, “The Good Wife: Stereotypes of Married Women Under Irish Law,” *Trinity Women’s Review* 1, no. 1 (2017): 45–67, 46.

⁵¹ Máire Herbert, “Goddess and King: Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland,” in *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Fradenburg L O Aranye (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 264–75, 265.

⁵² Herbert, “Goddess,” 266.

protrude from her head, past her ears, and could easily cut through a tree branch: “Consealgad/ glasgeg darach fo brith/ co roichead a hou.” She had dark bleary (smokey) eyes and a long crooked nose: “Suli duba dethaighe le,” “sron cham chuasach.”⁵³ The description continues to discuss everything from her unusual waist, her blotchy skin, her rickety shins, thick ankles, broad shoulders, big knees, and green nails.⁵⁴ Niall is the only one of his brothers, who are all potential successors to their father’s kingship, to embrace and satisfy the hag sexually. He does so without hesitation or disgust, but rather with enthusiasm.⁵⁵ In doing so, Niall has proven that he is worthy of holding sovereignty.

While the above description of the sovereignty goddess’ hag form is consistent with descriptions of the English Loathly Ladies, the poetic version of the *Echtra* offers some variation in the description of Niall and the two stages of the sovereignty goddess. The metrical version of

⁵³ Stokes, “Adventures,” 196-197.

⁵⁴ 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 shoulder blades were broad
her knees were big,
and her nails were green.
Loathsome in sooth was the hag’s appearance.
Stokes, “Adventures,” 197.

⁵⁵ Stokes, “Adventures,” 198-199.

the *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, titled *Echtra Mac Echdach Mugmedóin*, is taken from the twelfth century Rawlinson B. 502 (Bodleian Library MS. Rawl. B. 502). It is consistent with the version found in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*. They are cohesive, but their description of the sovereignty goddess' hag-form allows for some variation in specific details. As Amy C. Eichorn-Mulligan writes in her article that the poetic version is more concerned with bodies and physical attributes.⁵⁶ Niall's physical beauty is given specific attention, as this is an indication of his ideal candidacy for sovereignty while also creating a stark contrast to the Loathly Lady.⁵⁷ She is described as:

... bél aicce i tallfad cui, / a curach⁵⁸ fiacal 'moa cenn, eitchi indat fuiatha Herenn
 ...
 [. . . [she had] a mouth in which there would be room for a hound; her boat of
 teeth around her head was more horrible than the monstrous phantoms of
 Ireland...]⁵⁹

As with the prose version, the emphasis is on her facial disfigurement, particularly her mouth. Her teeth become supernaturally terrifying, allowing for her disfigurement to make her monstrous. Additionally, as Eichorn-Mulligan acknowledges that Ireland's monsters and phantoms had participated in the loss of at least one other king's sovereignty.⁶⁰ The medieval audience would have been aware of the allegorical meanings behind all sovereignty goddess' listed attributes. This mouth is the focus of the sovereignty challenge presented to Niall and his

⁵⁶ Eichorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1023.

⁵⁷ Eichorn-Mulligan cites his forest of hair and his light, shining, golden locks of hair (6, 12-13a, 63, 68a, p. 92, 94, 108), his large, slow-moving blue eyes (14, p. 96), his sweet, angelic voice (15, p. 96), and his fair back and shoulders. (16-17, p. 96). "Anatomy," 1023-1024.

⁵⁸ Joynt, "Echtra," 100.

Eichorn-Mulligan points out that The Book of Leinster uses clethchur (tooth-fence). Eichorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1024.

⁵⁹ Joynt, "Echtra," 100.

⁶⁰ Eichorn-Mulligan gives the example of Conaire Mór, the king that was supposedly exiled by the specters (siabrai). Eichorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1024. See also Amy C. Eichorn-Mulligan, "Togail Bruidne Da Derga and the Politics of Anatomy," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 49 (2005): 1–19. See also Eleanor Knott, ed., "Togail Bruidne Da Derga," *Medieval and Modern Irish Series VIII* (1936): xxiv–154.

brothers, which requires direct contact with that orifice. She asks each in turn for "do phoc dam-sa bel rem bel." ["Your kiss, with your mouth on my mouth."] ⁶¹ As with the English tradition, the contrast between the handsome young hero and the hag form of the Loathly Lady is stark.

The contrast between the sovereignty goddess' hag form and the perfect body of Niall makes her even more repulsive. The description of Niall's body follows typical idealized descriptions of young Irish kings. The poetic *Echtra* gives particularly lengthy descriptions of Niall's comely appearance "ní érracht iam bad chéemiu," which Joynt translates as "a lovelier whit there never was" (42). Multiple references are made to his shining golden "forest" of hair. ⁶² For example, "scothníam fuil óglind" which Joynt translates as [flower-like the sheen of his locks] (6). His large, languid blue eyes are mentioned "guirmidir gas do glaisin," [blue as deep as a sprig of woad] (14), his angelic voice (15) "Binnither toirm tet n-umi sephnait aingil inmuini/ fogur gotha in gáethmaill glain, meicc liechduind Locha Febail," [Sweet as the strings of bronze which lovely angels strike (was) the sound of the voice of the wise, gentle and pure, heroic son of Loch Febail,] and finally, his aesthetically pleasing back and shoulders (16-17) "im drummchla[i]r nden" (16) which Joynt translates as [his shapely back,] and his shoulders which were "Gilithir tonn tic dar trácht" [White as the billow that breaks o'er the beach]. While Joynt's translation is flowery and a product of the time in which she was worked, the specific imagery used to create the description of Niall's beauty not only creates a link between his body and the recognizable Irish landscape imagery and named places, but it also mirrors the description of the transformed beautiful body of the Irish sovereignty goddess, which uses equally identifiable and specifically Irish nature references to describe her beauty.

⁶¹ Joynt, "Echtra," 100.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 92, 94, 108.

The Loathly Lady's haggard appearance is transformed once the handsome young Niall satisfies her. In the poetic version, her body and her clothes now correspond to the contemporary ideals of early Irish beauty:

Ropo chomderg a haiged ocus corcair liac Laigen, / a muineal glan amal glain, a
barr mar buidean mBregain. Il Oenbrat uiainide impe, is he firsuiairc firfillte, /
snath sroil ris, ni thorchair de, co corthair oir foreoiscthe

[Her face was very red like the scarlet lichen of Leinster; bright as crystal was her throat, her head of hair was like the buttercups of Bregon. A peerless green cloak about her, truly pleasant, perfectly pleated, with a silk thread that did not fall from it, and a border of refined gold]⁶³

In both the prose and the verse versions, the transformed sovereignty goddess explains to Niall that her physical appearance had been both a test and a metaphor. A loathsome appearance represented the early stages of kingship when sovereignty was ugly and unpleasant. Because he was not deterred by her deformities, his reign will transform into one of beauty and tranquility.⁶⁴ The metaphor of the sovereignty goddess as the personification of Ireland is made apparent in the description of her idealized body. Specific topographical elements not only create between her description and that of Niall, but also of the land that Niall will rule over. Such elements as Leinster's lichen and buttercups in the Bregon area of Tipperary are incorporated to imply that she is Ireland. Green clothes evoke the fertile landscape, with the gold thread a reference of the financial riches to come. By virtue of her transformation as the result of Niall's obedience, it is implied that only he can "cure" her and thus obtain sovereignty.

Although nature-based imagery is still found in this description, the Sovereignty goddess is presented more as a conventionally beautiful queen. Her transformation is not only the climax of the saga, but also demonstrative of the didactic moral of the tale while following a theme of

⁶³ Joynt, "Echtra," 104.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 106.

healing. The body politic can be cured, even if the deformities of the body cannot. In Stokes' edition, she explains:

Acus amail adcondarcas misi co granna connda aduathmar art's 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 (16, p. 200)

[And as you have seen me loathsome, houndlike, fearsome first and beautiful afterwards, the sovereignty is like that, since it is seldom gotten without battles and without conflict, yet before any it is ultimately beautiful and of pleasing appearance.]⁶⁵

The significance of her dual forms and transformation is more nuanced than the explanation that she provides. As her body has transformed, so too has the body politic.

Eichorn-Mulligan points out that the poetic version is more focused on bodies.⁶⁶ Both bodies that personify sovereignty are given lengthy descriptions. They are directly related to the physical nature of the tests that the druid Sithchenn had the princely brothers endure. This description of Niall's physical beauty is reminiscent of the descriptions of Arthurian knights, such as Gawain, and proves that the contrast of ugly and beautiful is relevant throughout the Loathly Lady tradition. The hideous embodiment of sovereignty is the final test for the young men. It is the disfigured body of the sovereignty goddess that poses the ultimate test in all of the versions of the *Echtra* due to the significance of the body in relation to political sovereignty. The challenge that the hag-figure poses is rooted in her socially unseemly body, which she uses as a challenge to evaluate their ability to hold sovereignty and therefore satisfy its requirements as king.

The above descriptions of the sovereignty goddess are remarkably like those given by Gower and Chaucer in their versions of the Loathly Lady tale, both in terms of beauty and

⁶⁵ Stokes, "Adventures," 200.

⁶⁶ Eichorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1023, Footnote 30.

loathliness. Even though her entire body initially suffers from deformity, the detailed description focuses largely on her facial disfigurement, which includes characteristics predominantly associated with old age. Based on the impossibility of a king having a facial deformity and maintaining power in the Irish warrior culture, as seen in *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*, any association with sovereignty that the goddess may have is completely hidden by her hag form. Facial disfigurement has been neglected in the historiography of pre-modern Europe.⁶⁷ Evidence of lived experiences are limited to legal and narrative texts, which hinder the historical examination of facial disfigurement during the medieval period.⁶⁸ Facial difference is one of the defining characteristics of the Loathly Lady trope, which is utilized by later authors such as Gower to great grotesque effect. Her facial deformity is not the natural result of aging, but the result of supernatural disfigurement. As Braggs explains, disability and disfigurement were linked to positive attributes in Icelandic saga.⁶⁹ In the specific case of Oedipus, his sexual deviance was linked to his foot's physical deformity which provided him with supernatural wisdom and his heroic greatness. Oedipus Borealis becomes the paradigm for the aberrant hero associated with sovereignty, which can later be seen in Icelandic gods and giants.⁷⁰ The Irish sovereignty goddess is similar to this trope of a disabled supernatural figure.

These supernatural figures follow a similar pattern of physical disability. Blindness, muteness, and deafness were linked to supernatural abilities. Monstrosity, or loathsomeness, was linked to sexual vitality. The very few disability scholars who have examined this concept have not come to an agreement as to what extent social, material, or other aspects of disability can be

⁶⁷ Patricia Skinner, "‘Better Off Dead Than Disfigured’? The Challenges of Facial Injury in the Pre-Modern Past," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (2016): 25–41, 25.

⁶⁸ Skinner, "Better," 25.

⁶⁹ Braggs, *Oedipus*, xi.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

best examined through the experiences presented within these texts.⁷¹ As the concept of disability is a modern invention, scholars who examine historical disability risk labeling the disabled individual as simply "othered." Within the context of the Irish sagas and kingship literature, disability is yet to be conceptualized as a social or historical phenomena.⁷² Due to the distant nature of both the literary subject matter and the cultural context of the Irish material, the traditional curative "medical perspective" and societally constructed and contextualized "social mode" of disability studies are ineffectual. To create a greater understanding of the perception of disability and physical impairments within a warrior culture, it is important to recognize that the period does not recognize the difference between the medical and social modes, and at times appears to apply a more medicalized view, and at times a more social one. While facial disfigurement is a medical reality, the magical realities of the sagas and other texts allow for supernatural transformation and cures that are directly related to morality and didacticism.

The Irish sovereignty goddess exhibits a facial deformity, which was grounds for the loss of sovereignty in both saga and historic laws tracts. The social and cultural construction of disability in the medieval period lacks the unifying concepts and vocabulary established today, but embodied differences do exist in sagas.⁷³ While Jakobsson et al.'s invaluable article focuses on disability in Scandinavian saga, their insight into the treatment of bodies and embodied experiences are applicable to the Irish material. The examination of these principles in relation to Irish sagas offer valuable insights into the undiscussed topic of disability within sagas, as well as a fruitful connection between the Old Norse and Old Irish literary traditions. Jakobsson et al. point out that saga texts contain many accounts of embodied experiences that parallel later

⁷¹ Jakobsson et al., "Disability," 441.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 440.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 442.

conceptions of mental, physical, sensory, and other forms of impairments.⁷⁴ Although sagas are not equivalent to first-person accounts, they are a rich source of intimate and quotidian details that traditional scholars would find irrelevant.

As a result, the texts are "generally closer to the common experience of daily life," or, in W. P. Ker's terms, the "mean-ness of reality."⁷⁵ Based on this assertion, these texts provide valuable insight into early Irish social norms even though they focus almost solely on the ruling class. This can be problematic from a historicist's perspective, as saga literature generally pertains to historical events which purportedly happened hundreds of years before the existing document was transcribed. Jakobsson states, "As literary sources of ideas and ideologies, however, [sagas'] value remains enormous."⁷⁶ Eichorn-Mulligan has suggested that the physical deformities experienced by the sovereignty goddess in her hag-form was interpreted from a later Christian perspective of leprosy.⁷⁷ She acknowledges that no descriptive medical literature survives from pre-fifteenth-century Ireland; she proposes that this description would visually evoke the concept of leprosy in the mind of the reader through the visual characteristics and anatomical references.⁷⁸ There are two existing law tracts from the seventh or eighth centuries that deal with medical issues: *Bretha Crólige* [*The Law of Blood Lettings*] and *Bretha Déin Chécht* [*The Law of the Déin Chécht*].⁷⁹ This second tract focuses on fines levied against various bodily injuries, including disfigurement. By looking at the legal regulations and repercussions surrounding disability and disfigurement, it is possible to see the social mode of disability as it

⁷⁴ Jakobsson et al., "Disability," 442.

⁷⁵ W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1908), 201. Cited by Jakobsson et al., "Disability," 441.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁷⁷ Eichhorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1043.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1035.

⁷⁹ D.A. Binchy, ed. and trans., "Brethna Crólige," *Ériu* 12 (1938): 1–77.

D.A. Binchy, trans., "Bretha Déin Chécht," *Ériu* 20 (1966): 1–65.

was practiced during the time in which the texts were written. Based on Ker's perspective, the reaction of the princes to the sovereignty goddess' hag form is indicative of the common reaction of real individuals when they encounter someone who is old or disfigured.

While the description of the sovereignty goddess' hag form and the repulsion expressed by Niall's brothers may have been representative of ageist and ableist reactions to the disabled old peasant woman, the transformation of the goddess is allegorical. The transformation or healing of the Loathly Lady's body suggests a successful transfer of sovereignty to the new King of Ireland. In both the prose and verse version, sovereignty appears as a "diseased, leprous, female form," yet even in this weak state she still has the power to give or withhold kingship.⁸⁰ Her body is not only a variant of the body politic, but also sexualized, gendered, and deformed. As Eichorn-Mulligan points out, the Loathly Lady is aware of the metamorphosis of her body and its didactic significance.⁸¹ This is an acknowledgement of her role as an allegorical figure as well the suggestion to the reader "the need to perform a type of textual exegesis on her body to determine what she symbolizes and how she accomplishes it."⁸² While Eichorn-Mulligan argues that the sovereignty goddess is a victim of leprosy and all of its ill effects, trying to diagnose the sovereignty goddess would not be appropriate for this chapter. There is insufficient evidence provided in the *Echtra* that would allow for a diagnosis of leprosy. Instead, her physical description is congruent with the descriptions of the Loathly Lady in the English tradition. While her body is described as "spotted with pustules, diseased," (11) according to Stokes's translation, there is no definitive proof that this was caused by that specific disease.⁸³ Furthermore, a close look at the original Irish can nearly negate this claim entirely.

⁸⁰ Eichorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1016.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1015.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1015.

⁸³ Stokes, "Adventures," 196-197.

Stokes, in his standardized translation, offers “spotted with pustules, diseased.”⁸⁴ This is an example of why the knowledge of the original language is helpful for scholarship. The word from which he gets this description is “brechbaindech” which is a compound noun. In this large word, there are three small words: an adjective, a noun, and an indeclinable adjective that functions as a superlative. The trouble lies in the first small word—the adjective. The adjective could be either “brecc” which means “spotted, speckled, ornamented, or patterned.”⁸⁵ As there is no other mention of pustules, these “spots” could very well be warts, moles, freckles, or age-spots. It could equally be a variant of the adjective “brecht” which means “varied” or “confusing” in the sense of being unusual.⁸⁶ “Bain” or “bein” is an archaic accusative singular declension of a feminine long a- stem noun “ben” meaning “woman.” “Dech” is an indeclinable adjective that functions as a superlative. This word could translate as the “most spotted woman” or potentially the “most unusual woman.” It is quite possible that the scribe intended both meanings. The complete phrase in which it appears “medon fethech brechbaindech” does not mention the word for pustules or any variants thereof, as “medon fethech” means “a sinewy waist,” which Stokes translates as “middle fibrous.”⁸⁷ The only association of this adjective with pustules or any variant thereof is only seen in Stokes’s translation, as can be seen in the *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*’s list of examples.

In the examples provided therein, the word is used multiple times to describe the face of both people and animals to be freckled, speckled, or brindled.⁸⁸ This is not a sign of oozing sores, but potentially of damaged skin most likely caused by aging and sun exposure or the

⁸⁴ Stokes, “Adventures,” 197.

⁸⁵ eDIL s.v. 1 brecc.

⁸⁶ eDIL s.v. brecht. While this adjective can be identical to brecc when used in a compound noun, it means “varied” or “confusing.”

⁸⁷ Stokes, “Adventures,” 197.

⁸⁸ eDIL s.v. 1 brecc.

pattern in an animal's fur. While it is inappropriate to diagnose the sovereignty goddess, the description given leads to the interpretation that this is a reference to warts or age-spots. This is congruent with the other signs of old age that are exhibited in her description, specifically her bristly grey hair, unusual teeth, bleary eyes, and rickety shins. Her thick ankles, and big knees may be included as additional signs of ageing suggesting arthritis or lymphedema (11). Even in the poetic version, there is no mention of pustules. Thus, it can be concluded that Eichorn-Mulligan's diagnosis of leprosy falls short. Instead, the sovereignty goddess' body is by her own admission a representation of the corruptible nature of sovereignty (16). When she first encounters Niall, the sovereignty goddess embodies the current state of sovereignty, which is old and ready to die. As in other texts, the Loathly Lady figure is the only example of an aged person. Niall's father, Echoid Muigmedón, is not an elderly man, but he has reached the inevitable end of his kingship. This can be seen through the evil queen's anxiety over the succession. Although it is out of order, Echoid Muigmedón's death and the death of his temporary successor Crimthann mac Fidaig precedes the *Echtra* in Stokes' version. Crimthann mac Fidaig was the brother of the evil queen Mongfind, who poisoned him.⁸⁹ The inclusion of an evil stepmother is another element that links the text to the Loathly Lady tradition. Conversely, the transformative supernatural power of sovereignty as related to the behavior of the would-be King takes on greater significance in Irish saga. When sovereignty passes to the young ideal Niall, it is not just her body that is transformed, but the very nature of sovereignty.

The hag state is an inversion of the ideals of contemporary female beauty. Niall proved his worthiness of kingship and she is transformed into a woman who appears to be an appropriate consort for him with looks and clothing that indicate high social standing.⁹⁰ While Eichorn-

⁸⁹ Stokes, "Adventures," 175.

⁹⁰ Eichorn-Mulligan, "Anatomy," 1034.

Mulligan uses the word “aithech” as denoting “a person of low status and a being of monstrous appearance,” and uses this as part of the basis for her diagnosis of the sovereignty goddess as suffering from leprosy, it is not a fully appropriate translation, nor can it be located in the original source material.⁹¹ This is another example of the potential dangers of working solely with translated texts. According to the *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, “aithech” has several meanings. It is primarily used in legal texts to refer to a vassal or a tenant, someone of the peasant class as opposed to a member of the nobility.⁹² This term can also be used to refer to a master or mistress of a household. In an extremely rare case, it can mean someone who is boorish or uncouth.⁹³ This is a reference to someone along the lines of the Carl of Carlisle, not a wandering diseased outcast.

While Eichorn-Mulligan’s article is well-researched and interesting, it can be seen as an example of the difficulties scholars encounter when trying to engage medieval source material with post-modern definitions and concepts. Her study leaves much to be desired as it does not provide an adequate examination of the medieval treatment or perception of leprosy in Ireland in part because it does not exist. As Taylor et al. discuss at length, very little is known about the perception or treatment of the disease in Ireland, but what is documented differed from that in England and on the continent as Ireland was never part of the Roman empire.⁹⁴ As they point out, hospitals dedicated to St. Stephen, St. James, and St. John the Baptist were established in Dublin. While these hospitals were not central to medieval Dublin, they were not far removed. Rev. Myles V. Ronan wrote a brief history of the “lepper house” dedicated to St. Stephen, which is

⁹¹ Eichorn-Mulligan, “Anatomy,” 1034.

⁹² eDIL s.v. 1 aithech.

⁹³ eDIL s.v. 1 aithech.

⁹⁴ G. Michael Taylor et al., “Leprosy at the Edge of Europe—Biomolecular, Isotopic and Osteoarchaeological Findings from Medieval Ireland,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 12 (2018), “Introduction,” np.

now the Mercer Hospital on St. Stephen's Green.⁹⁵ Based on the humanity expressed towards Othured individuals (with the exception of corrupt kings) in Early Irish law tracts, and the creation of the hospitals, it is possible to conclude that these diseased individuals were neither shunned nor reviled to the extent proposed by Eichorn-Mulligan. This study does not intend to diagnose the sovereignty goddess but rather use the lens of disability studies instead of an illness narrative to examine the relationship between disfigurement, disability, and sovereignty within an early Irish context.

III: The Able-bodied Politic

Disfigurement and disability play an important and largely unexamined role in relation to sovereignty in Irish kingship literature. McCone explains that “at the heart of early Irish kingship theory lay the notion that a kingdom’s welfare in both the social and natural spheres was intimately bound up with the sovereign’s physical, social, and mental condition.”⁹⁶ An understanding of the role of facial disfigurement in political discussions of sovereignty is crucial to a reading of the sovereignty goddess, as she embodies sovereignty while inhabiting a disabled body. The role of disability and facial disfigurement in Irish saga demonstrates the social mode of how facial disfigurement was treated in Ireland during the medieval period, as well as facial disfigurement’s direct association to political sovereignty in Early Irish literature. As with other popular genres and types of sagas, Old Irish saga and kingship literature contain a wide variety of myths and legends. These tales form a literary hybrid of historical fact and fiction. The texts are populated with stereotypes, which is helpful when striving to understand what society at large

⁹⁵ Rev. Myles V. Ronan, “St Stephen’s Hospital, Dublin,” *Dublin Historical Record* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1942): 141–148, 141.

⁹⁶ McCone, *Pagan*, 108.

thought about those who were considered outsiders. These outsiders did not conform to expected patterns of social behavior or socially constructive norms of body configuration. This chapter does not seek to diagnose, but rather to examine the impact on disability and disfigurement in relation to Irish sovereignty. As this is a largely unexamined topic, it is necessary to explain the social connotations and regulations of disability in Irish kingship literature. This will allow for a more detailed examination of the role of sovereignty and kingship in Irish society, which is necessary to fully understand the role of the sovereignty goddess and disfigurement in the *Echtra* and *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*.

The *Echtra*, *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*, and other Irish sagas are set in a mythological past that allowed for the expression of the social and cultural anxieties of medieval Ireland. McCone explains how the nature of Irish sovereignty greatly changed with the invasions of the Vikings in the ninth century and the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth. He elaborates that Irish sagas focus on the sovereignty and power dynamics of small tribal territories known as *túath* which were ruled by a king, a *rí*. These were tenuously linked together into five larger groups that were governed in a “curiously ritual pattern.”⁹⁷ This pattern focused on social taboos, or *gessi*.⁹⁸ These *gessi* not only regulate the body and behavior of the king, but they are also frequently associated with a sovereignty goddess who transforms into a beautiful woman or revert back to her hag-like state when the king has violated the *gessi*, such as in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* [The Destruction of Da Derg’s Hostel] and *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* [The Violent Death of Muirchertach mac Erca].⁹⁹ The requirements of kingship within the mythological saga literature is both innate and individualized to each ruler through the various taboos or *gessi*. These taboos are somewhat

⁹⁷ McCone, *Pagan*, 8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

random regulations of the king's personal behavior and body which would void his sovereignty if he committed a transgression. A violation of the *gessi* was a portent of the king's doom.¹⁰⁰ While there are broader taboos which each king must subject themselves to, such as the one related to physical bodily perfection or wholeness- there are also more personalized taboos which are specific to each individual king figure and play a key role in the individual king's narrative. These often relate to aspects of the king's body: how it could appear, where it could go, and how it can comport itself. The physical embodiment of sovereignty— the king's body or the body politic— must subject itself to the authority of the advisors who help the king to maintain sovereignty and avoid these taboos within the narratives. These advisors or *fili* are the same individuals who composed the narratives, which gives great importance to the actions of the poet-historian-advisors within the Irish saga tradition.

In *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*, the disabled body of the king mirrors the corruption of his advisors. In a warrior society, the unblemished or whole body of the king speaks to his military prowess. The above passages describing Niall of the Nine Hostages and the transformed sovereignty goddess focus on elements of the face and body that are associated with whiteness and brightness. In saga, eyes and hair are described as shining, the body is “shapely” and “fair.” As today, teeth are compared to pearls, while lips and cheeks are compared to flowers. Damian McManus points out, the beauty of the king figure, which would qualify as his physical perfection or qualifier for kingship, is rooted in his facial features.¹⁰¹ This makes the facial disfigurement of Fergus and the other disqualified kings more politically and socially significant. The emphasis on the physical beauty of Niall's face serves to heighten the intensity of the

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰¹ Damian McManus, “Good-Looking and Irresistible: The Hero from Early Irish Saga to Classical Poetry,” *Ériu* 59, no. 1 (2009): 57–109, 63.

grotesque description of the sovereignty goddess in her Loathly Lady guise. In the poetic *Echtra*, her face is described in equal and opposite terms, with an emphasis on darkness and notable animalistic characteristics around the face and mouth. This mirrors the facial deformities of Fergus mac Léti. Within kingship literature, descriptions of prosperity, peace, and good weather were directly linked to the *fir flatha*, "the sovereign's truth." The connotations of this truth were more of a general sense of the king's integrity and ability to hold sovereignty. It included the king's physical appearance and possible disfigurement as a reflection of the king's body and mind. Catastrophic consequences were the result of breaking this truth. These were not limited to war, famine, and strife. Breaking this promise was known as the *gáu flatha*, or "the sovereign's lie."¹⁰² The king must obey these taboos or *gessi* to maintain sovereignty and the safety of Ireland. These characteristics described are known as *febas*, which translates as "personal excellence."¹⁰³ These serve as part of the qualifications for the position of kingship.

While the Irish concept of kingship was more based in meritocracy than the English or Continental feudal models, *cenél* [kinship/ family] was still a prerequisite for sovereignty, with each new king-candidate requiring at least a grandfather who had been High King.¹⁰⁴ *Gáis* [wisdom] and *gnáis 7 gaiscuid* [habits and heroism] were equally important, but McManus argues that it was the physical perfection of the king which was of the utmost importance as his body visually reflected the condition of his people.¹⁰⁵ In the multiple descriptions of king figures that are available in Irish saga, the characteristics follow a somewhat established pattern which are compared to precious and naturally occurring objects. This can be seen in the above

¹⁰² McCone, *Pagan*, 108.

¹⁰³ eDIL s.v. *febas*.

¹⁰⁴ McManus, "Good Looking," 59. Citing T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90.

¹⁰⁵ McManus, "Good Looking," 59.

description of Niall and the sovereignty goddess. Special attention to detail is given to the description of the head, face, and mouth. Keeping this formula in mind, the contrast to the deformity exhibited by the Loathly Lady form of the sovereignty goddess is made even more significant.

Reading *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* helps the reader to recognize the importance of the physical and moral perfection of the king candidate, and this clarifies the role of disfigurement in Loathly Lady stories. The *Saga of Fergus mac Léti* shows that the significance behind this requirement is rooted in the wider concept of cohesive physical and moral perfection necessary to maintain sovereignty in a volatile historical setting. Through an examination of the various interpretations of kingly bodies, be they idealized like Niall or disfigured like Fergus, it becomes clear the socio-cultural link between physical beauty and the bestial nature of political sovereignty in medieval Ireland. McManus explains that the physical perfection of kings was not simply prosaic, but a verifiable legal matter. In a text about the legalities of beekeeping, there is a reference to the seventh-century king Congail Cháech [Congal of the One Eye]:

Air is sí cétnae breth iriso ceta-rucad im chinta bech for Congail Cháech cáechsité beich. Ba-ch rí Temro condid-tubart assa flaith.

[For this is the first judgement which was passed with regard to the offences of bees on Congal the One-eyed, whom bees blinded in one eye. And he was king of Tara until [this] put him from his kingship]¹⁰⁶

McManus emphasizes that these blemishes (*locht(ach)*, *ainem*, *aithis*) were not battle scars, but injuries which were not expected to heal, which this chapter classifies as disfigurements resulting in permanent disability. He gives the example of Fergus mac Léti and Conchobar, who had a second brain lodged in his skull as the result of a prophecy and a battle, as examples of the few

¹⁰⁶ T. M. Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly, eds., *Bechbretha, of Early Irish Law Series 1* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), 31-32. Cited by McManus, "Good-Looking," 61.

kings that would defy the *gessi* to maintain kingship at the request of their advisors even though they were physically disqualified.¹⁰⁷ Both of these ill-advised kings were able to maintain sovereignty for a period of seven years before meeting their destiny and their deaths. Although there are only two examples of disabled kings attempting to maintain sovereignty, the extreme measures taken by their advisors and their willing violation of the *gessi* condemn these kings and their actions.

These *gessi* act as constant tests of sovereignty and moral restrictions for the king. These are concepts which were central to the established “sacral kingship” which had previously existed in Ireland.¹⁰⁸ Ireland was not unique in this belief. Most cultures established some level of sacral kingship. Sacral kingship centered around the monarch's supernatural or predestined abilities as well as their role as a mediator between the human and the divine. This sacred bond established an irrevocable link between the body politic and the physical body of the sovereign. This also integrated the equilibrium of the social and natural worlds of their realm.¹⁰⁹ As a result of this concept, the physical body of the sovereign must be perfect. The king must be intellectual, healthy, and virile as his body symbolized the transcendental and temporal aspects of the realm, as well as his own claim to sovereignty.¹¹⁰ A common cause for a king to lose his sovereignty or his life was to break the *gessi*. The possible breach of *gessi* lingered over all Irish kings. These were attached to the individual, not to the kingship itself.

The perfection of the king is a common theme in Irish kingship literature, as he is seen to embody perfection. This is a necessary requirement of the *fír flathemon* [the king's truth].¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ McManus, “Good Looking,” 62.

¹⁰⁸ McCone, *Pagan*, 108.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹¹ McManus, “Good Looking,” 59.

Perfection was not simply an example of early Irish aesthetics but showed the king as an embodiment of sovereignty. The significance of this concept for an aging king has not been discussed in great depth. This is most likely because the kings did not have very long lives due to occupational hazards. As it was a violent warrior culture, the king must be able to fight. The maintenance of a perfect body implies that the king must be untouchable in battle. As Watson explains the further significance of this:

Sovereignty must create order in all things. Therefore, the king's truth is seen as so all important in early Irish society. Schematically, the king is viewed as someone whose truth and person must be flawless, for it is by upholding his own honour that he upholds the honour and face of his tribe. The monarch creates order in a society by himself being a personification of order. If the king cannot embody these concepts, then disaster can befall the tribe which he rules.¹¹²

The Irish sovereignty goddess is the embodiment of sovereignty. When she is first encountered, this body is deformed and disfigured. Her facial deformity presents a particular challenge to the assumption of sovereignty; her deformity must be overcome and embraced rather than avoided. Her imperfect body is the equal and inverse experience of the king figure, who must maintain a perfectly whole physical body to maintain sovereignty. Jakobsson et al. also address the problematic grounds of hypothetical discourse of disability which can be pieced together under the modern "umbrella term of 'impairment.'"¹¹³ Instead, they propose a hypothetical discourse of disability within the context of Scandinavian sagas that uses the depiction of bodies as "a medium that materializes and translates physical, sensory, and intellectual differences in a way that the society depicted in the sagas sometimes identifies as a deviation from what is considered normal in their own historical and sociocultural contexts."¹¹⁴ In the Irish context, facial deformity

¹¹² Alden Watson, "A Structural Analysis of Echtra Nerai." *Etudes Celtiques* 23.1 (1986): 129-42, 133.

¹¹³ Jakobsson et al., "Disability," 442.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 442.

takes on different gendered significance. For non-sovereign warriors, it can be a positive attribute.

The importance of facial deformity in literature allows it to be seen as a definitive link between the Old Irish and Old Norse saga traditions. One particular element of facial deformity is shared more broadly between the Icelandic and the Old Irish Sagas: the gouging out a single eye. The most important of Irish heroes, Cú Chulainn, has a facial abnormality. He was the most celebrated and talented warrior of Irish literature, and he is often compared to Achilles. He was known for his battle rage or *ríastrad*. This would cause his body to twist and transform in an unrecognizable and frightening way. The contortions included a facial deformity in which one eye would become significantly larger and one would disappear into its socket. This was not a permanent disfigurement but rather a ritualized *in imitation* like the practice of the Irish sun god Lugh who would hop on one leg and see through his one eye to have success in battle.¹¹⁵ This action would have facilitated success in battle by invoking and embodying the mythological figure through interpretation and emulation.

The Ulster women appropriated a disability in emulation of their favorite warrior: “The women of the Uliad suffered three blemishes: every woman who loved Conall had a crooked neck; every woman who loved Curscaid Mend Machae son of Conchubur stammered; and every woman who loved Cii Chulaind [sic] blinded one eye in his likeness.”¹¹⁶ This is the inverse experience of the king figure, who must lead the warriors such as these heroes into battle. While physical disfigurement is celebrated as a sign of these heroes’ bravery, their kings are not afforded the same luxury. Their bodies must remain intact as they must be the best of the

¹¹⁵ Bragg, *Oedipus*, 61.

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Gantz, trans., “The Wasting Sickness of Cu Chulaind,” in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (New York: Dorset Press, 1981), 155–78, 156. Cited by Bragg, *Oedipus*, 61.

warriors and thus worthy of sovereignty. The king's body must be unblemished in order to show that he is such an excellent warrior that he cannot be touched, thus securing his sovereignty and the safety of his kingdom. Fergus mac Léti is a rare example of a disabled king. With the exception of a few kings who have lost sovereignty and the sovereignty goddess herself, disabled figures occur rarely in Irish saga.

The above passage shows the contemporary social attitude towards disability and facial disfigurement. It is only the king who must maintain a flawless body. In the warrior culture of early medieval Ireland, physical disfigurement because of bravery was considered attractive and a sign of valor for all other men. Within Early Irish saga, the term *enech* is often used to simultaneously signify an individual's "honor, respect, dignity" as well as their "face, appearance:"

By a transition of meaning apparently connected with the tendency for feelings of shame or humiliation to be reflected in the countenance, *enech* comes to be used in the sense of honour, repute, good name. The *enech* of an individual might be damaged by unatoned insult or injury on the part of another, or by any act on his own part which was dishonouring to his own status, or any failure to fulfill the duties of his rank. Such acts or lapses, when unatoned, left a stain upon his '*enech*' and thus damaged his status.¹¹⁷

The lengthy grotesque description of the sovereignty goddess' hag form and Fergus mac Léti's consequential facial disfigurement are exacerbated by the typically prosaic descriptions of the king figure's shining beauty. The unblemished nature of the king's body is found in multiple sagas and legal commentary. For example, Congal Cáech was removed from the kingship of Tara after receiving a bee sting that caused him to lose an eye.¹¹⁸ This example is specifically

¹¹⁷ E. G. Quin, ed., *Dictionary of the Irish Language: Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1990), 273.

¹¹⁸ Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*, 31-32. See also page 131.

Congal remained king of Ulster until his death in battle in 637. This account is the only case cited within a law text. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1995), 21-22.

mentioned in a text regulating the kingship of Tara which forbade facial disfigurement.¹¹⁹ In *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti*, the titular king breaks several *gessi*. He is awarded the ability to breathe underwater in all but a certain bay. He swims in this bay and encounters a hideous sea monster: “At the sight of it his mouth was wrenched back as far as his occiput, and he came out on land in terror.”¹²⁰ He is so terrified that his face freezes in fear. This is an inverse of the sovereignty goddess transformation. Fergus’s face became disfigured because he has broken the *gessi* governing his sovereignty, thus proving that he is a bad king and has no right to rule.

His advisors tried to hide his disfigurement from everyone including himself so that he would not lose his kingship. This ultimately results in his death. In this instance, his facial disfigurement is a sign of cowardice. The final lines of the saga state: “a horror which appeared to him — fierce was the conflict — Was the cause of his disfigurement.”¹²¹ His facial deformity is a sign of his fear and thus his inability to be a successful king. Even his charioteer remarked that “nibud urusa ri co nainim i nEmain.” [“It would not do to have a blemished king in Ulster.”]¹²² The idealized body of the king represents his capacity for sovereignty. The loss of an eye, an arm, or facial disfigurement renders them unable to function as the embodiment of sovereignty. The kings themselves are physically different from their warrior subjects as they must be physically perfect in a violent environment that would normally separate earned physical marks of valor. Based on their social position, even physical deformities earned in battle, such as Nuada’s loss of an arm, disqualify them from maintaining sovereignty. They must be untouchable and godlike. As the body politic, they embody the authority of the sovereignty goddess and must be the perfect vessel to wield this power.

¹¹⁹ D. A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), 13-14.

¹²⁰ D.A. Binchy, ed. and trans., “The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti,” *Ériu* 16 (1952): 33–48, 43.

¹²¹ Binchy, “Fergus,” 44.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 38.

There is a clear link between the sovereignty tests, the tales of Niall's life, and Old Norse saga. One of these elements is facial deformity. It is established that a great deal of Celtic oral traditions was recorded in Norse manuscripts, and each took the role of a foreign "other" in their respective literatures. Lindy Brady examines the corresponding biographies of the two men, noting that Láfr's mother, Melkorka, was an enslaved Irish princess.¹²³ Additionally, elements of the Loathly Lady motif are present in her elderly nursemaid. Even though the prince does not transform her into a beautiful young woman, his actions do return her to a healthy state. This concept has been gestured to by Brady, but it has not been elaborated upon.¹²⁴ The Loathly Lady again appears in *Cóir Anmann* [The Fitness of Names]. Dáire Doimthech named all five of his sons Lugaid so that one would be king. One night, they meet a repulsive looking hag in an early form of a tavern (*linn*). As in the tale of Niall of the Nine Hostages, all but one of the sons refuse her advances. Lugaid Laigde sleeps with her. This act causes her to transform into a beautiful maiden. She says almost the same statement "*missi in flaithius 7 gébthar rige nÉrenn úait.*" [I am the sovereignty, and the kingship of Ireland will be obtained from you].¹²⁵ This test for kinship is seen by Brady as an undiscussed Irish motif in the Icelandic *Laxdæla Saga*.¹²⁶ The heroic biography of the Icelandic hero Láfr pái is an Old Norse saga which can be read as a counterpart to the historic biography of Niall of the Nine Hostages.

While the sovereignty goddess is transformed from an ugly hag to a beautiful woman through the actions of a soon to be king, the practice of sovereignty must remain at a state of perfection. The *gessi* regulate not just the body of the king, but also his morality. In the *Echtra*,

¹²³ Lindy Brady, "An Irish Sovereignty Motif in *Laxdæla Saga*," *Scandinavian Studies* 88, no. 1 (2016): 60–76, 63.

¹²⁴ Brady, "Irish," 69.

¹²⁵ McCone, *Pagan*, 109. Citing Whitley Stokes, "Cóir Anmann (Fitness of Names)," essay, in *Irische Texte: Mit Wörterbuch*, ed. Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1887), 285–444, 318–21.

¹²⁶ Brady, "Irish," 61.

the changeable nature of sovereignty is expressed by the sovereignty goddess' acknowledgement of her physical transformation which mirrors the harsh and changeable nature of political sovereignty. While Niall behaves honorably and goes on to be an ideal king, *The Saga of Fergus mac Léti* shows the dangers of violating the *gessi* and abusing sovereignty. The text also shows that it is impossible for an immoral king to avoid the consequences of his actions. The *gessi* are in place not just to govern the king's body, but the body politic. In an inversion of the sovereignty goddess motif seen in the *Echtra*, he has become disfigured, thus implying his loss and corruption of sovereignty which is reflected in the corruption of his body.

Conclusion

In recognizing the standardized English translation of the *Echtra* as analogous to the "Tale of Florent" and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" it becomes clear that the Loathly Lady is always being interpreted according to her historic context. The *Yellow Book of Lecan* is a very particular context that historically occurs at the same time as the other tales, yet no one has acknowledged the implications of this. This is significant, as that is the version which is most accessible to English speaking scholars. Both the English and the Irish texts focus on issues of sovereignty, but they do so in very different ways. The Irish text is inherently political as it focuses on the historic biography of the founding father of one of the most powerful families in medieval Ireland who both aligned with and challenged English authority. The plethora of kingship texts in the *Yellow Book of Lecan* shows the fifteenth century Irish preoccupation with and nostalgia for independent sovereignty. The English texts, however, transform the nature of sovereignty within the Loathly Lady tradition from political to personal.

Multiple additional key elements are present in both the Irish and the English texts. There is a problematic stepmother figure. The protagonist is an idealized young male warrior. The

interaction between the protagonist and the Loathly Lady figure occurs in a borderland setting outside of the direct control of political authority. There is a didactic message about treating the disabled, the elderly, the less fortunate, or the Other with respect. Most noticeably, the detailed description of the sovereignty goddess is congruent with that of the aged appearance of the English Loathly ladies. In the English material, the descriptions of her mouth and face vary in detail, but the idea of a face that has been weathered with age remains. While her entire body exists outside of normative beauty standard, her loathliness lives in her mouth. In the context of Irish kingship literature, facial and bodily disfigurement are directly related to sovereignty. Facial disfigurement functions as a challenge to sovereignty. For a king, facial disfigurement means the loss of his sovereignty, as a king must abide by the rules of the *gessi* which require him to be physically perfect, which is a sign of his good kingship and the ability to obey the restrictions of the *gessi*. For Fergus, he not only violated the *gessi* by swimming where he was told not to, his corrupt advisors knowingly hid his disfigurement and further violation in a failed attempt to maintain his sovereignty. For young Niall, it was embracing a challenging facial disfigurement that granted him sovereignty.

In reading a version of the sovereignty myth in light of a legal exemplum, *Fergus*, the relationship between Irish sovereignty and disability is exposed as nuanced and significant even in a practiced legal standard. To build upon Ker's statement, this shows the "real mean-ness" of medieval Irish attitudes towards disability and its relationship to sovereignty during a tumultuous political time for both Ireland and England.¹²⁷ While the sovereignty goddess has been read in terms of disability studies once before, this study was inadequate. The new interpretation of age and impairment, rather than disease, provides a useful framework for the application of disability

¹²⁷ Ker, *Epic*, 441.

studies to Irish saga for the first time. The interpretation of the Irish sovereignty goddess as an aged figure is relevant to the perception of age and ageism in the English texts. For the sake of clarity and the convenience of scholars who work predominantly with the English material or the Irish material in translation, I have made the conscious decision to predominantly use the standard translation of the Irish texts to engage with the same material that is available to those without a working knowledge of Old Irish. As demonstrated by this chapter, Eichorn-Mulligan's article, and McLeod's article, the standardized translations are imperfect. The inability to engage with the source material is a hindrance and a risk. In challenging Stoke's translation, the sovereignty goddess transforms from a leper to the ugly old woman seen in the English tradition.

While Eichorn-Mulligan engages with the body of the sovereignty goddess as a potentially lived bodily experience, the disfigured body of the sovereignty goddess is a commentary on the *gessi* and the legal regulations of sovereignty as practiced in medieval Ireland. These texts reflect contemporary social anxieties and the nostalgic desire for an ethical and idealized sovereign who would restore sovereignty to Ireland. In reading the *Echtra* with the *Fergus*, the purpose of disability in Irish saga is to challenge the morality of the male protagonist and determine who has the right to rule. As the sovereignty goddess, she is a personification of political sovereignty. Her body, due to her age and impairments, is the exact opposite of the body that the king should have according to the *gessi*. This personification of sovereignty offers a direct parallel to the body of the king figure, who is also the body politic. While she de-ages to match the beauty of the new young king, it is inevitable that the body of the king, and the body politic in a warrior culture, will age, become disfigured, or die.

Chapter II: Identifying Disability in the “Tale of Florent” and Book VIII of the *Confessio*

Amantis

Introduction

The Loathly Lady first appears in English literary tradition in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (1386), a 33,000-line story collection in Middle English verse.¹ In literary criticism, Gower’s Loathly Lady is most often discussed with her counterpart, the slightly later and more celebrated Loathly Lady who appears in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” one of the *Canterbury Tales* (c.1387-1400). Due to the documented friendship between the two men, and the similar nature of the tales, it is most likely that the “Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” was directly influenced by Gower’s “Tale of Florent.”² Just as Gower has always existed in Chaucer’s shadow, so too has Gower’s interpretation of the Loathly Lady been overshadowed by Chaucer’s. This chapter will propose an important new reading of the “Tale of Florent” by arguing that the representation of its Loathly Lady must be understood in the context of Gower’s status as a disabled writer and his self-presentation as an ageing and inappropriate lover. Amans, Gower’s textual representative, is unable to perform the role of a traditional romantic lover due to their shared and intentionally emphasized advanced age.

¹ The *Confessio Amantis* is a series of tales and *exemplum* told over the course of eight books, each of which discuss one of the Seven Deadly Sins. The narrative itself is a discussion between Amans, who wants to become the perfect courtly lover, and Genius, the Confessor or chaplain of Venus, the goddess of Love. The text is framed around Amans confession to Genius, as he is hoping to be cured of the pain of unrequited love. John Gower, “Confessio Amantis, Volume 1,” *Confessio Amantis, Volume 1*, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway, (Robbins Library Digital Projects, 2006), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1>.

² Gower’s influence on Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales* is discussed by a variety of critics, including: Frederick M. Biggs, *Chaucer’s Decameron and the Origin of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017) and Brian Gastle, “Gower and Chaucer” in *The Routledge Research Companion to John Gower*, eds. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, Brian Gastle, and R. F. Yeager (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2017), 296-311.

This physical inability to perform a desired social role ultimately subverts the romantic elements of the tale and the *Confessio Amantis* as a whole, which makes the book's greater didactic purpose more apparent. This function can be seen in the microcosm of the "Tale of Florent," which at first glance appears to be a traditional romance. However, as each tale is intended to be morally instructive, it is necessary to examine the behavior of the character that is supposed to teach the moralizing lesson. Amans is the intended audience of the tale. Amans is too old to be a conventional courtly lover like Florent. Instead of modeling his behavior on Florent, it is logical to infer that Genius intends for Amans to look at the figure who is also too old to be a conventional love interest, the Loathly Lady. By viewing the Loathly Lady as having the primary didactic function within the "Tale of Florent," the text is thematically and structurally linked to the denouement at the end of Book VIII and the macrocosm of the *Confessio Amantis*. To establish the Loathly Lady as a didactic character and a textual parallel to Amans, it is necessary to establish Amans as an intentionally aged representation of Gower, who consciously sought to present himself as a wise older man. Secondly, it is necessary to examine the connection between Amans and the Loathly Lady in terms of their shared physical impairments, which ultimately makes them unable to perform their intended role of the romantic love interest.

Once this background is established, it becomes clear that Gower's Loathly Lady exists in a very different framework from Chaucer's. Chaucer celebrates a multiplicity of different narrative voices in the "General Prologue" of the *Canterbury Tales*, which establishes each narrative voice as belonging to unique and individual characters which are then able to compete against one another. Gower's multiple characters express the conflicting moral perspectives of Amans and Genius, who are in turn different facets of the poet himself. This chapter will first

establish the connection between Amans as a textual extension of the poet John Gower. Although Gower was middle aged at the time of writing the *Confessio Amantis*, Amans corresponds to the elderly yet wise literary persona that Gower deliberately crafted for himself. Secondly, this chapter will present the Loathly Lady as a disabled but didactic character that is a textual parallel to Amans. These two characters offer gendered perspectives on aging as a form of disability within a medieval context.

The *Confessio Amantis* is centered around the confession of Amans, the lover, to Venus's priest, Genius. The book itself is divided into eight books, each of which is themed around one of the Seven Deadly Sins.³ The "Tale of Florent" (I. 1407-1882) appears in Book I, under the Sin of Pride, under the subheadings of Disobedience and the lesser sin of Murmuring. Florent, a young idealized knight errant, must answer an impossible question in order to save his own life. After several failed attempts to discover "What alle wommen most desire" (I. 1481). The answer is that women wish to "Be sovereign of mannes love" (I. 1609). This is revealed to him by an ugly old hag on the condition that he marry her. He fulfils his promise to marry her, only to find out that she can be a beautiful woman either during the day or during the night. The choice is up to him. He asks her to make the decision. By giving her this control over her own body and their relationship, Florent permanently breaks the curse of her old age. Florent's obedience permanently restores the Loathly Lady to her true form, a beautiful princess "Of eyhtetiene wynter age" (I. 1803).

³ Book VII does not conform to this structure and is explicitly about the education of a king. John Gower, "Confessio Amantis: Book VII," ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway, *Confessio Amantis: Book 7*, (Robbins Library Digital Projects, 2004), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-book-7>.

Amans desires to be a courtly lover and gain the love of an unnamed beautiful young woman. The reader would naturally assume that Amans should model his behavior after Florent, as he is the example of a conventional romantic hero. Florent is also the protagonist of the tale and the one who has learned the lesson on murmuring and obedience that Genius is nominally trying to teach, as discussed by James M. Dean.⁴ Yet, it is revealed in Book VIII that Amans is too old to fulfil this role. He is, in fact, the aged John Gower. Instead of modeling his behavior on Florent, he should look at the example of another older figure in the tale. Like Amans, the Loathly Lady is too old and ugly to be the young Florent's bride. Her value and worth come from the esoteric knowledge that she uses to save Florent's life. Through the inclusion of the didactic figure of the Loathly Lady, the tale offers insight into the gendered medieval perception of aging as a disability.

Jonathan Hsy, Sebastian Sobecki, and Tony Vandeventer Pearman are among the few critics who actively address Gower as a disabled author.⁵ It is accepted that Gower did in fact go blind during the last decade of his life, as R. F. Yeager points out.⁶ Gower was describing himself as elderly and disabled when he was still well within the confines of middle age. Building on Yeager's work, I believe that Gower purposefully created an aged and impaired literary persona whose physical impairments are consciously imposed on Amans. It is with the "Tale of Florent"

⁴ James M. Dean, "The Hag Transformed: 'The Tale of Florent,' Ethical Choice and Female Desire in Late Medieval England." *In Approaches to Teaching the Poetry of John Gower*, ed. Yeager, R. F., and Gastle, Brian W. New York: Modern Language Association of America, (2011), 143-58.

⁵ Johnathan Hsy, "Blind Advocacy: Blind Readers, Disability Theory and Accessing John Gower." *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media* 1 no.1 (2013). n.p. Article 2. Sebastian Sobecki, "'Ecce patet tensus': The Trentham Manuscript, 'In Praise of Peace,' and John Gower's Autograph Hand." *Speculum* 90 (2015), 925-59. Tony Vandeventer Pearman, "Blindness, Confession, and Re-membering Gower's Confessio." *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media* 1 no. 1 (2013). n.p. Article 3.

⁶ R. F. Yeager, "Gower in Winter," in *Medieval Python: The Purposive and Provocative Work of Terry Jones*, eds. Toshiyuki Takamiya and R. F. Yeager (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 87-104.

that the confessor, Genius, seeks to highlight the absurdity of Amans performing the role of the lover because of these impairments. Given this background, it is relevant to appropriate the methodology of disability studies.

Disability studies is a new and rapidly expanding field that seeks to give a voice to those who are marginalized because of an embodied difference.⁷ The effect of exclusion from certain social activities on a person's individual experience gives rise to debates surrounding the interaction between the social construction of *disability* and the physical experience of an individual's bodily condition or *impairment* in relation to one's socio-cultural context.⁸ The field of disability studies is currently flourishing as this methodology can be applied to a variety of academic disciplines. While the diverse range of contributions makes for interesting discourse, this also makes terminology fractured and often confusing.⁹ Theorists of disability studies such as Pearman, Susan Wendell, Irina Metzler, and Edward Wheatley categorize disability as a social construct, rather than a bodily condition. Medical and rehabilitation models of disability focus on the curative nature of conditions with the goal of "restoring" a disabled body into a socially constructed "norm."¹⁰ This curative model is a reflection of the presence of the stigmatization of those with "visible physical difference and those without when there is a discrepancy between one's actual identity (how one sees ones self) and one's virtual identity (how others view him/her).¹¹ Pearman has created a gendered literary model that builds upon the work of Metzler and Wheatly, who specifically focus on embodied difference during the medieval period. While

⁷ Tory Vandevanter Pearman. *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

⁸ Pearman, *Women*, 3.

⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002), 1-32, 1.

¹⁰ Pearman, *Women*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 2, citing Goffman.

Erving Goffman, *Stigmata: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

this conversation is developing in literary theory, Pearman's book *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* remains the authority on this subject. In borrowing terms and methodology from disability studies, the similarities and the differences of Amans and the Loathly Lady can be discussed in a new way and provide further insight into the role of disability in Gower's writing.

Amans and the Loathly Lady can be read as disabled characters because their advanced ages make them physically unable to successfully function as a romantic love interest. Amans' impotence is textually alluded to, as is the Loathly Lady's initial infertility. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter agree with Sandy Feinstein that the Loathly Lady is sexually active.¹² Her physical appearance would impair her from this act: as Gower writes, she is so hideous "That [she] myhte a mannes lust destourbe!" (l. 1688). Feinstein explains in some detail that the Loathly Lady's sexual activity is grotesque and 'unnatural' because her age impairs her from having a child.¹³ Ultimately, it is both of their physical appearances that makes them inappropriate romantic lovers as well as their inability to physically perform this desired role as their younger love interests are reluctant if not repulsed at the possibility of engaging in romantic or sexual intercourse.

The revelation of Amans' old age near the end of the eighth and final book provides specific details of the first persona narrator, Amans, that identify him with the poet and author John Gower, notably giving his name to the goddess Venus as "John Gower" (VIII. 2321). The revelation of Amans' identity is intentionally shocking to the reader, as is the sudden

¹² S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, "Introduction." in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, edited S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), xiii-2, xiii.

Sandy Feinstein, "Longevity and the Loathly Ladies in Three Medieval Romances." *Arthuriana* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 23-48, 26.

¹³ Feinstein, "Longevity" 26.

transformation of the Loathly Lady into a young woman. Her true identity is that of a princess “Of eyhtetiene wynter age” (I. 1803) which allows her to fulfil the role of an idealized sexual love interest. Amans’ identity as that of John Gower, the aged and infirm poet, does not allow him to fulfil the role of the lover as a convention of the romance genre.

By approaching old age as a series of impairments, this tale can be read through the lens of disability studies. This chapter interprets the Loathly Lady as a literary representation of the impairments and limitations of old age, which can be magically reversed. Gower/Amans provides a lived experience of the impairments of old age, some of which he purposefully exaggerated, showing that one must accept the increasing physical and social limitations of age. Gower/Amans shows that these new impairments limit some activities, such as romantic love, but increase other skills or attributes, such as wisdom. The Loathly Lady provides an interesting contrast: while there are multiple stages of male life, she offers an example of female life that is restricted to the dichotomy of youth and old age. By applying methodology from disability studies and feminist studies, Gower’s Loathly Lady tale can be read as a gendered critique of the traditional perception of the ageing and the disabled within medieval society.

I. Gower as Amans

The “Tale of Florent” reflects the “ableist” attitude towards physical impairments, such as those caused by ageing, during the medieval period. In the tale, Gower treats old age as a curse that can be magically cured and completely reversed, like the curse placed upon the Loathly Lady. Once the curse that caused her physical impairments is broken, her youth is restored so that she can fulfill her role as a young royal bride. Florent is then able to fulfill his age-appropriate role as a sexually potent young man. However, Gower’s advanced age has caused a

physical impairment that makes both he and his fictional representative, Amans, unable to physically function as a romantic lover: he is impotent.¹⁴

“Min herte wolde and I ne may”
Is nocht beloved nou adayes;
Er thou make eny suche assaies
To love, and faile upon the fet,
Betre is to make a beau retret;
For thogh thou myhtest love atteigne,
Yit were it bot an ydel peine,
Whan that thou art nocht sufficant
To holde love his covenant. (2412-2420)

Levine takes the inclusion of personal details such as these as factual, describing the *Confessio* as "among other things, the long, bad dream of a sick old man."¹⁵ The inclusion of this personal, and possibly embarrassing, physical impairment was a deliberate choice made by Gower that highlighted the physical effects of old age that he shared with Amans. This reproductive impairment makes him physically unable to fulfill the role of a lover and makes it inappropriately comical for him to fulfill the role of a romantic hero. The humor found in the inability for his body to function in the way that he romantically desires echoes the Loathly Lady's age and ugliness, which make her an inappropriate bride for Florent. By showing that Amans should look to the Loathly Lady for a didactic message, rather than to Florent, Genius is reminding Amans and the reader of social implications of Gower's advanced age.

By distancing himself from this role and the foolishness traditionally associated with the early stages of life, Gower establishes himself as a sage-like poet who is qualified to discuss morality and give advice to the King of England. Gower claimed to have written the *Confessio*

¹⁴ Robert Levine, "Gower as Gerontion. Oneiric Autobiography in the *Confessio Amantis*." *Mediaevistik* 5 (1992), 79-94, 89.

This article explores the multiple autobiographical elements included by Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* with an emphasis of the numerous references to blindness and impotence scattered throughout the text.

¹⁵ Levine, "Gerontion," 89.

Amantis at the request of the young Richard II. The first of the three recensions of the text dedicates the work to Richard II and includes an anecdote implying that the young king had commissioned the work when they crossed paths in barges on the Thames. Gower includes a section on the education of a king in Book VII and revisits it at length in the final lines of Book VIII, from line (VIII 2109-2121) beginning “For conseil passeth alle thing/To him which thenkth to ben a king;” (VIII. 2109-2110). The inclusion of this obviously political rhetoric in one of the final interactions between Genius and Amans calls for the attention of the reader because of its thematic and textual location: we have reached the end of the text; these are the points that Gower most wants the reader to know and carry with them into the real world.

Very little biographical information about Gower exists. Most of what is known about the poet’s life comes from the details he provided when making his own funeral arrangements and the writing of his will. Information about his life and his reputation as a poet can also be gleaned from literary sources, such as the numerous and detailed colophons that are attached to his major literary works.¹⁶ The year 1330 is the generally accepted date for Gower’s birth, although this has been debated at length by Yeager, who proposes that it is equally possible for Gower to have been born in 1340.¹⁷ For the purpose of this chapter, I agree with Yeager that the specific date of Gower’s birth and his biological age are not necessary to categorize him as an aged and disabled author. Gower deliberately creates a literary persona that is experiencing the impairments associated with old age in order to appear in an acceptable social position to dispense advice and commentary on morality, which is the dominant theme of his major works.

¹⁶ Siân Echard, *A Companion to Gower* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 1.

¹⁷ Yeager, “Winter,” 90.

Hsy has focused critical attention on Gower's blindness.¹⁸ Gower did go blind at some stage during the last ten years of his life, but he began to complain about the physical ailments associated with the elderly while he was still in the heart of middle age, regardless of the year in which he was born. For example, in line 53 of the Prologue of Book II of the *Vox Clamantis*, he writes "Est oculus cecus, aurisque manet quasi surda" [My eye is blind, my ear almost deaf].¹⁹ As pointed out by Yeager, at the time that this was written, in 1380, Gower would have been either 40 or 50 years old, making it highly unlikely that he was actually physically blind.²⁰ As previously stated, Gower's deliberate association with these impairments may be metaphorical or rhetorical rather than physical. The average life expectancy of an aristocratic male in London during the year 1400 was 54.²¹ Conversely, Yeager successfully establishes that medieval writers were often gifted with longevity as they were removed from the dangers of warfare, allowing writers such as Petrarch and Machaut to live into their seventies.²² This allowed them to record the experience of old age.

The biographical actuality of Gower's physical experience is not what this chapter would like to call into question, but rather the deliberate inclusion of these physical impairments as part of the literary persona that he shares with both the figurative Amans and the Loathly Lady. It is possible that Gower's focus on these physical impairments caused by advanced age would equally categorize him as a disabled author because that is how he wants to be seen. Gower emphasizes, even exaggerates, his age and physical impairments for a specific purpose. He seeks to remove himself from the role of a poet that would conventionally focus on romantic literary

¹⁸ Hsy, "Blind," 1.

¹⁹ Yeager, "Winter," 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹ Neil Cummins, "Lifespans of the European Elite, 800–1800." *The Journal of Economic History* 77, no. 2 (2017): 406–439, 407.

²² Yeager, "Winter," 91.

topics in order to focus his work and reputation on the concepts of wisdom and morality that are associated with later stages of life regardless of his biographical age.²³ This self-fashioning is textually related to the construction of Amans as an inappropriate lover and the representation of the Loathly Lady as equally impaired and grotesque in her sexuality.

Physical decline and subsequent disability are often associated with chronological age. Chronological age is culturally divided into varying stages, each in possession of its own unique expectations and connotations, such as discussed at length by J.A. Burrow.²⁴ As Burrow and Yeager discuss, physical decrepitude is not expected until the final stage of life. It is in this elderly state that the individual succumbs to weakness and helplessness due to a processional loss of physical and mental faculties.²⁵ It is the loss of these faculties and the presence of physical conditions or impairments that can define old age in terms of disability as a series of impairments related to advanced chronological age which renders an individual unable to perform certain tasks or biological functions.²⁶ The extent of these impairments is unique to each individual, but we all experience physical decay as time progresses. Regardless of the exact year of his birth, Gower was not a young man when he wrote the *Confessio Amantis*, nor would he be considered elderly.²⁷ Yeager discusses the implications of Gower's purposefully constructed old

²³ Although Yeager discusses this deliberate choice at length in his chapter "Gower in Winter: The Last Poems," he proposes that his age and impairments were emphasized as a method of self-preservation during the great political turmoil of the early years of Henry IV's reign.

²⁴ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book), 2015.

²⁵ Yeager, "Winter," 91.

²⁶ Although there have been interesting studies linking old age and disability, such as Mark Priestly and Parvaneh Rabiee. "Building Bridges: Disability and Old Age." Building Bridges: Disability and Old Age: Centre for Disability Studies. December 2001. Accessed May 23, 2019. <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/research/building-bridges-disability-and-old-age/>, definitions or terminology such as "old age" are scarce and conflicting at the best of times.

²⁷ If Gower had been born in 1340, rather than 1330, he would have been in his mid-forties, rather than mid-fifties when he finished the *Confessio Amantis*, around sixty when he wrote the *epistola* to Arundel as well as "Quiquid." Although both ages are far from "young", Gower had a substantial statistical chance of surviving into his seventies as he was neither a soldier nor a plague victim (Yeager, "Winter," 90).

age at length and argues convincingly that Gower's self-presentation as elderly and decrepit may have offered the poet a mode of protection during the turbulent political environment of his later years.²⁸ One of the last poems written by Gower, "Quicid homo scribat," dated 1400-1402.²⁹ It goes into colorful detail, bemoaning the loss of the poet's eyesight and physical health.³⁰ The poem supports Yeager's theory that Gower's aged persona was a sort of protection against the social upheavals which claimed the lives of several of Gower's contemporaries. The poem also expresses anxiety towards an uncertain future.

In this poem, Gower specifically states how his impairments have hindered his art and livelihood. There is also a notable parallel between the inability to write, or produce with a pen, and the sexual impotence linked to Amans, as well as the Loathly Lady's infertility. Gower describes himself as a victim to impairments with which Nature has cursed him, specifically that she has taken his sight, his physical strength, his ability to write and function as a poet, although he still longs for the ability to write: "Posse meum transit, quamuis michi velle remansit" [The ability is passed over further, although my will has remained.]³¹ There are two other distinct versions of this poem in four different manuscripts. In the London, British Library Additional MS 59495, also known as the Trentham manuscript, Gower specifically says that his blindness and cessation of writing occurred during the first year of the reign of Henry IV (1400-1401).³² In

²⁸ Yeager, "Winter," 94-95.

²⁹ John Gower, 'Quicquid homo scribat', in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899-1902), IV. 365: (Cited by Echard, *A Companion*, 1.)

Quicquid homo scribat, finem natura ministrat,
Que velut vmbra fugit, nec fugiendo redit;
Illa michi finem posuit, quo scriber quicquam
Vlterius nequio, sum quia cecus ego.
Posse meum transit, quamuis michi velle remansit;
Amplius vt scribat hoc michi posse negat

³⁰ Yeager, "Winter," 91.

³¹ My translation.

³² Yeager, "Winter," 90.

the other three manuscripts: Cotton Tiberius A.iv; London, British Library, Harley MS 6291; and Glasgow, University Library Hunterian MS T.2.17 Gower claims that his blindness occurred in the second year of Henry IV's reign, 1401-1402.³³ As Yeager points out, Gower clearly expressed his experiences with the effect of time on his aging body in the denouement of the *Confessio Amantis*, as well as in the *epistola* to Arundel, and in the various form of "Quiquod." 1386 is the commonly accepted date for the completion of the *Confessio Amantis*. The *epistola* to Arundel and the various incarnations of "Quicquid" were written 14-16 years later.³⁴ Regardless of its incarnation, this is congruent with Echard's interpretation of this poem as a convergence of Gower's poetic voice and his increasingly disabled physical body.³⁵ Gower's experience with disability directly affected his writing in both physical and conceptual ways.

Although Gower made these very specific claims of disability later in life, he makes similar complaints and extensive references to blindness in the much earlier *Confessio Amantis*.³⁶ These complaints of physical impairments that are traditionally associated with old age were integral to the creation of Gower's authorial persona. Even during his middle age, as he was when writing the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower wanted to be seen as old. His established reputation as being old and decrepit would have been well known to his medieval audience and arguably survives to the present day. This established reputation as a mature or old man extended to the illuminations found in manuscripts containing his major works, including one that he most likely oversaw the production of himself. Yeager writes that the image of Gower that exists today is

³³ Ibid., 90.

³⁴ Ibid., 90.

³⁵ Echard, *Gower*, 1.

³⁶ Levine, "Gerontion," 79-94.

Pearmen, "Blindness," n.p.

Hsy, "Blind Advocacy," n. p.

that of “an elderly, bearded man in a long robe.”³⁷ On his effigy in Southwark Cathedral, he wears a red and gold gown with a full, black Van Dyke style beard. The image of Gower that survives in popular consciousness differs from the stylized image of the effigy. Yeager’s theory of why medieval and present people would think of Gower as older or elderly is because of the surviving images of Gower within manuscript illuminations, most of which depict him as an old man. In the London, British Library MS Cotton Tiberius A.iv, fol. 9v [Figure 1],



Fig. 1

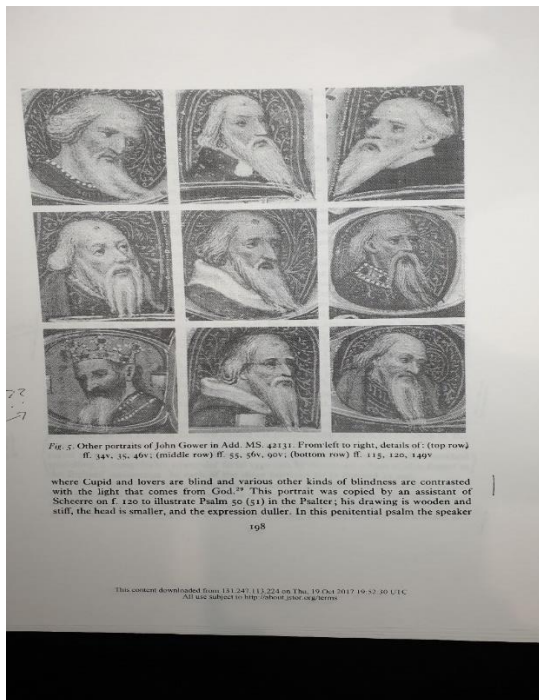
Gower is depicted in a blue robe with a beehive style hat, carrying a longbow. His beard is medium length, forked, and clearly salt-and-pepper. In the Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 902 fol. 8r [Figure 2], Gower wears a long red robe with a long, white, unkempt beard that spans the width of his face and descends to his mid-chest, intentionally dominating the figure.

³⁷ Yeager, “Winter,” 87.



Fig. 2 (detail).

Additionally, Gower appears in a miniature (London, British Library MS Additional 42131, fol. 209v) [Figure 3] with a bald pate with luscious shoulder-length white hair, bushy white eyebrows, and a large forked white beard that would extend three to four inches below his chin.³⁸



³⁸ “Yeager, “Winter,” 87.

³⁹ Sylvia Wright, “The Author Portraits in the Bedford Psalter-Hours: Gower, Chaucer and Hoccleve.” *British Library Journal* 18.2 (1992), 190-201, 198. Taken from London, British Library MS Additional 42131, fol. 209v.

There are also images that support the interpretation that Amans is a young lover, but these images reflect the contemporary stylistic traditions of manuscript illumination, unfamiliarity with the ending of the text, and the traditional assumption that a lover must be a young man. One such image is present in what is considered to be the most famous manuscript of the *Confessio Amantis* Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 3, fol. 8r [Figure 4], which was used by C.G. Macaulay for his standard edition of the text. This image shows a handsome young man, intending to represent Amans, kneeling before his confessor, Genius.



The Lover's confession.
John Gower. *Confessio amantis*, late 14th century.
Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 3, fol. 8r.

Fig. 4

This image is repeated in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 294 fol. 9r [Figure 5] in which the young man has thick brown hair and bare cheeks. Yeager points out that these images are not

intending to be portraits of Gower but are identified as the eponymous character Amans.⁴⁰ They are representations of an idealized youth in the contemporary illumination style.



Fig. 5

Yeager agrees that the aged kneeling gentleman in MS Bodley 902 [Figure 2] was equally intended to represent Amans. Jeremy Griffiths has analyzed the placement of miniatures in the production of *Confessio Amantis* manuscripts, and notes that the image of the aged Amans “occupies the same locus respectively as the youthful ones.”⁴¹ As the evidence of the manuscripts suggests, illuminators who were not familiar with the ending of the text were not aware that Amans is an old man. Those who were unaware of Amans’ identity or who chose not to represent this fact, depicted Amans as a conventional lover. First time readers who accessed these manuscripts would have no reason to expect that Amans was anything other than a conventionally young romantic lover. Readers of other manuscripts, which did depict Amans as he is described at the end of the work, would be aware of the aged status of Amans from the opening of the poem, well before they encountered the “Tale of Florent.”

⁴⁰ Yeager, “Winter,” 88.

⁴¹ Jeremy Griffiths, “*Confessio Amantis*: The Poem and Its Pictures,” in *Gower’s Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A.J. Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 163-178. Cited by Yeager, “Winter,” 88.

The image of the aged Amans in MS Bodley 902 [Figure 2] closely resembles the archer/Gower in BL MS Cotton Tiberius A.iv [Figure 1], a manuscript believed to have been supervised by Gower during its construction, although this involvement does not transform this image into a portrait. Both images depict an older man with a mustache and forked beard. The two images share several visual similarities. The angles of both heads are the same. Their noses are of a similar structure. Their eyebrows are of similar width and location on the face in relation to the eyes and long, narrow nose that seems to become a common trait to emphasize when depicting Gower in addition to the grey hair and forked beard. The images differ in date of completion, manuscript, size, and function.

The image of the archer is shooting a T-O map that shows that he is aiming at the larger target of nations, rather than individual people, assuming the role of a diplomatic cupid. In this instance, Gower is again connecting himself and his moralizing rhetoric with the abstract concept of Love. As in the *Confessio Amantis*, he uses the disguise of the romance genre to hide the actual political message of his verse. For example, to build on Sobecki's argument, the lovers that Gower refers to in the Trentham manuscript can be read as premodern conceptions of nation states, rather than individual humans. This can be most clearly seen in the poems *Ecce patent tensus* (Behold the Taut [Bow]).⁴² This poem, written from the perspective of Cupid, stresses the compelling force of love, although it is not a simple reflection on "omnia vincit amor" (line 3). Almost half of the lines are sourced from the *Vox Clamantis*, while referring to *In Praise of Peace*, which occurs earlier in the text, and continuing the amatory theme of *Cinkante Balades*,

⁴² Sobecki, "Hand," 234-235.

which directly proceeds it. Lines 18-20, which are not taken from the *Vox Clamantis*, invoke a Cupid who targets nations, rather than people:

Vulnerat omne genus, nec sibi vulnus habet
Non manet in terris qui prelia vincit amoris,
Nec sibi quis firme federa pacis habet

[He wounds every nation, but receives no wound himself
In the wars of Love there is no victor on earth,
Nor has anyone concluded with him a firm treaty of peace]⁴³

Love, nations, treaties, and peace are common themes throughout Gower's works. He is able to discuss love from a moralized esoteric perspective due to his constructed advanced age Genius in this poem may refer to "nation" or "people." Cupid's arrow of love is so powerful that it can shoot at nations in their entirety.⁴⁴ This poem, which draws heavily on the *Vox Clamantis* and emphatically reiterates the blindness of Cupid is directly connected to the image of an "old" archer, which is believed to be Gower, that appears in the illustrations of a number of manuscripts of the *Vox Clamantis*, including the British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A.IV [Figure 1], which Sobecki believes signifies Gower's direct involvement in the production of the manuscript.⁴⁵ Gower, the presumed mature archer, has fashioned himself as a politically minded version of the blind god of love, Cupid.

Cupid is disabled figure in the *Confessio Amantis* who is central to Amans' physical healing and acceptance of his aged identity. Even though Gower makes multiple references to blindness throughout the *Confessio Amantis*, Cupid is a character who is not simply described as blind, he also performs this impairment within the text:

This blinde god which mai nocht se,

⁴³ "Ecce Patet Tensus." *Ecce Patet Tensus* | Robbins Library Digital Projects. Accessed May 31, 2019. <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/yeager-gower-minor-latin-works-ecce-patet-tensus>.

⁴⁴ Sobecki, "Hand," 234-235.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

Hath groped til that he me fond;
And as he pitte forth his hond
Upon my body, wher I lay... (VIII. 2794-2797)

He removes the arrow of Love from Amans', which allows for his wound to be healed by Venus and for him to accept his identity as John Gower, the aged poet. The *Confessio Amantis* offers a series of veiled political critiques, as discussed by Yeager.⁴⁶ He writes that "The political message of 'The Tale of Florent' is, . . . on one level, that the knightly class has only to gain by ceding sovereignty to where it rightly belongs."⁴⁷ The purpose of this chapter is not to examine the political message of the tale, but rather the veil itself. The tale is told by Genius to the penitent Amans, who alludes to his identity as Gower in terms of profession at the end of the tale:

And clerkes that this chance herde
Thei writen it in evidence,
To teche how that obedience
Mai wel fortune a man to love (I. 1856-1859)

Amans identified himself as a clerk, "Thus I, which am a burel clerk (52)" early in the prologue. This connection means that Genius is aware of Amans' age as he tells him the tale even though Amans does not wish to acknowledge it for himself.

As previously stated, Gower's identity as an old man would have been known to the reader of the *Confessio Amantis* due to his depiction in manuscript illuminations, as would the age of Amans. This revelation or acknowledgement of his identity comes at the ending of Book VIII with Amans being forced to recognize his aged face in Venus's mirror shortly after he had given his name to be "John Gower" (VIII. 2321). "Sche axeth me what is mi name./ 'Ma dame,' I

⁴⁶ R.F. Yeager, "The Politics of Strengthe and Vois in Gower's Loathly Lady Tale" in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, eds. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 42-72.

⁴⁷ Yeager, "Vois," 58.

seide, 'John Gower.'" Venus still scorns Amans/ Gower's petition to her, leaving the argument between Amans/ Gower and the allegorical figure of Nature. Nature's only counsel is "Remembre wel hou thou art old" (VIII.2439). This causes him to faint.

In his unconscious state he experiences a vision including all the lovers whose tales were told in the *Confessio Amantis*. These lovers pass by him in a review of the states of sexual passion: first he sees the lovers who are enraptured with their love for one another, followed by those who pass by in sorrow and despair. In contrast to this, he sees four constant women who have given an example of true moral goodness that has been remembered by the world. It is through this vision that the overarching didactic function of the *Confessio Amantis* is revealed to Amans/ Gower and the reader while Amans incorporates the moral implications of the tales into his personal experience. The classical authors and historians whose work Gower has reinterpreted appear to Gower as well so that he can be accepted among them. Finally, Elde, the allegorical figure of old age approaches Venus, followed by his lovers: David, Aristotle, Virgil, Plato, "Sortes," (possibly Socrates)⁴⁸ and Ovid. These classical and biblical figures successfully pray for Amans' release from love's inappropriate grasp; Cupid removes the fiery dart which had been the source of Amans' anguish. The symbolism of this vision implies that the wisdom of antiquity can heal the social fractures of the present.⁴⁹ This also justifies Gower's step into a different state of maturity that has a greater emphasis on intellect and acting as a guide for those who are younger.

Drawing on Yeager's theory that Gower's aged persona is intentionally created as a method of self-preservation, Gower intends to make his political critique as innocuous and

⁴⁸ Russell A. Peck, "Introduction." In *Confessio Amantis*, 1-41. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006). See note VIII. 2718 for further discussion on this debate (296).

⁴⁹ Peck, "Introduction," 34.

balanced as possible. By assuming the persona of an aged, infirm, and wiser old man, he can present moralizing guidance in a manner that is more palatable than being admonished by a man in his prime. Amans provides an aged prosthesis that aids the delivery of Gower's didactic message. As Peck has argued, Gower is using Amans as a representation of himself in a way that draws on the Boethian tradition of inserting self into text. Additionally, Peck identifies Gower as Genius. The entire narrative of the *Confessio Amantis* is a "tale" of Amans being in debate with Genius within the style of a poem of consolation, which as Peck points out, was a genre with great philosophical appeal to Middle English writers of the fourteenth century.⁵⁰ Other such texts that are considered by Peck to be consolations are *Pearl*, Usk's *Testament of Love*, Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of the Three Ages*, and, in a more complex way, Langland's *Piers Plowman*.⁵¹ These texts are similar in both subject matter and plot structure: the narrator's unsettled state of mind, often due to an unstable social situation, is analyzed and alleviated in a displaced reality such as a dream or in a fictional setting.

The state of anguish or confusion is often described as a physical illness, which often manifests itself in the form of a death-wish.⁵² The invalid, as described by Peck, will often express a desire for a cure. The dis-ease of the penitent poet normally falls within questions of fundamental identity such as "Who am I?" The tales then function as a gradual revelation with each tale being a partial remedy to this state of identity.⁵³ This ends again with medical imagery following the example of Boethius' baring of his wound in order that Philosophy might apply the appropriate medicine.⁵⁴ This leads to a denouement in which the penitent or patient returns to the

⁵⁰ Peck, "Introduction," 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁴ (*Consolation* 1.pr.6) "'Whethir wenestow,' quod sche, 'that this world be governed by foolysche happes and fortunows, or elles wenestow that ther be inne it ony governement of resoun?'" (lines 7-10, Chaucer's translation).

initial state of being with a better understanding of his condition.⁵⁵ The Loathly Lady is returned to her true form by way of curative magic. No such cure is offered to Amans.

As Boethius's work was so influential during the medieval period, it is evident that Gower's bifurcation of the authorial role into "Amans" and "Genius" was modelled on the similar bifurcation of Boethius's identity in the Prisoner and Lady Philosophy.⁵⁶ One of the explicit inclusions of Boethian identity is Venus' question "What art thou, sone?" (1.154, 160). Amans replies, "A caitif that lith here: / What wolde ye, my ladi diere?" (1.161-62). This is reminiscent of the question posed by Lady Philosophy to Boece in the *Consolation*, yet Amans is so distraught and disoriented by his dis-ease that he has forgotten the correct answer to the question: "a man,"⁵⁷ which may also be a pun with his nominal identity "Amans." He is helpless in the confusion of his identity, which has impaired his reason. Gower the poet sees this as an illness, as the goddess Venus diagnoses it as such and offers medical attention:

"Tell thi maladie:
What is thi sor of which thou pleignest?
Ne hyd it noght, for if thou feignest,
I can do thee no medicine." (1.164-67)

As Peck states, this is again similar to Philosophy's request that Boethius bare his metaphorical wound by accurately describing his mental state.⁵⁸ However, the exchange between Amans'

Boethius, the prisoner, is unable to answer Lady Philosophy's question. This causes her to ask the pivotal question "Remembrestow that thow art a man?" (lines 55-56). Philosophy knows what medicine to apply when he is unable to define what it means to be a man. She begins his treatment with "'Now woot I, quod sche, 'other cause of thi maladye, and that ryght greet: thow hast left for to knowen thyselve what thou art'" (lines 68-70). As cited by Peck, "Introduction," 23-24.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁶ See Intro note 25 for further discussion on the influence of the *Consolation* on medieval literature. Peck, "Introduction," 7.

⁵⁷ This is similar to Philosophy's catechism for Boece as she attempts to diagnose his illness (*Consolation* 1.pr.6): "'Whethir wenestow, quod sche, 'that this world be governed by foolysse happes and fortunows, or elles wenestow that ther be inne it ony governement of resoun?'" (lines 7-10, Chaucer's translation). Boece is unable to answer the question reasonably, which causes Philosophy to pose the next crucial question: "Remembrestow that thow art a man?" (lines 55-56) As cited by Peck, *Confessio*, 34.

⁵⁸ See *Consolation*, 1.pr.4 cited by Peck, *Confessio*, 34.

discourse with Venus and his interchange with Genius are inspired by the conversation between the Prisoner and Lady Philosophy. Through the act of confession, which Peck views as similar to telling a tale, the desires and identity of Amans will be reestablished and transformed, as is the identity and physical form of the Loathly Lady in the “Tale of Florent.” The Loathly Lady is completely transformed from the inappropriate though wise would-be lover into an idealized romantic partner. The transformation of Amans also contains a physical or medical transformation of his body, as Venus restores his kidneys, the seat of passions “Sche hath my wounded herte enoight,/ My temples and my reins also” (VIII. 2818-2819).⁵⁹ This emphasis on bodily transformation is a tangible link between Amans and the Loathly Lady.

There are close verbal and conceptual parallels between the descriptions of the physical impairments of the Loathly Lady and Amans. The descriptions which render the Loathly Lady as grotesque, old, ugly, and an inappropriate love interest are similar to the description of Amans as he views his reflection in the mirror during the reveal of his identity at the end of Book VIII, which are also present in the illustrations representing Gower. The subject of these descriptions may seem unremarkable; they simply describe the average ravages of old age. It is only Genius’ emphasis, which is supposedly also Florent’s, that intentionally creates revulsion both in the mind of the reader and Amans because of his age. Amans’ age is not only a central point of the “Tale of Florent,” but a lynchpin of the *Confessio Amantis*. In a reference to the nominal purpose of the book, which was to be “Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore,” (Prologue 19) Venus taunts Amans because of his aged appearance, “For loves lust and lockes hore” (VIII. 2403).

And thogh thou feigne a yong corage,
It scheweth wel be the visage
That olde grisel is no fole (2405-2407)

⁵⁹ Peck, *Confessio*, 34.

In Book VIII, Amans/ Gower is mocked and scorned by Venus because his physical body is unable to fulfil his desires for romantic and physical love not only due to his physical inability, but because it is socially inappropriate for this stage in a man's life, as is first stated in the Latin verses introducing the section on Old Age:

“Conueniens igitur foret, vt quos cana senectus
Attigit, vltorius corpora casta colant.”

(It would be appropriate, therefore, for those whom
white old age touches henceforth to
cultivate chaste bodies. Peck's translation)

Amans' age keeps him from fulfilling the societal role that he wants to assume; he can be classified as disabled. Gower's literary persona is intentionally created to incorporate physical impairments that bring with them implications of wisdom, rather than social stigma. If either of them happened to be a woman, their disabilities would be perceived very differently.

As the tale is didactic, Genius wishes Amans to identify himself with a character within the text in order to learn from their behavior and decision. Due to his awareness of Amans' age and desires, it is not Florent that Amans should look to, but the other older figure in the text. Through the use of traditional romance elements and comedic effects borrowed from the fabliau genre, such as the grotesque descriptions of the Loathly Lady's hag-form, Gower creates a distraction or a superficial moral of tale which hides the political critique. Genius, as a confessor and as the personification of a concept, knows Amans' true age, identity, and impotency. The didacticism shows Amans that his behavior is grotesque due to his advanced age and physical impairments that he textually shares with the Loathly Lady.

II. Amans and the Loathly Lady

The “Tale of Florent” is told by Genius to Amans in Book I. Although the tale appears under the sins of Pride and Murmuring, it can be read as illuminating his behavior and his desire to be a romantic lover is inappropriate, grotesque, and comical. The parallel Genius creates between Amans and the didactic figure of the Loathly Lady shows that although Amans is unable to function in the way that he would like because of his advanced age and physical impairments, he is still able to fulfil and perform other valuable roles in society because he is a man. Although he is physically impotent and sexually undesirable, he is still able to make valuable intellectual contributions. The Loathly Lady provides a gendered parallel revealing what happens when societal worth or role is based on solely sexual desirability and fertility, as is the case for women. This critical framework illuminates the role of the Loathly Lady as a didactic figure which Amans should reflect upon and model his behavior after, rather than the idealized young Florent.

Both of these figures have detailed descriptions of the physical characteristics that would prevent them from performing the role of a romantic lover. The Loathly Lady is disabled not just because of her old age, but also because of her gender. To have a female body was to have a disability in most authoritative texts of the medieval period, ranging from “biblical, to patristic, to medical texts.”⁶⁰ These writings provide examples of a sociocultural production of gender and bodily ability. The definition of bodily ability is generally omitted from most studies of disability. This established state of ability is integral to understanding the social anxieties surrounding Othered or disabled figures. It

⁶⁰ Pearman, *Women*, 1.

is equally important to acknowledge that medieval authors do not intend to correspond to twenty-first century definitions and understandings of gender or disability, nor common medical practices. However, the combination of these discourses allows for a particular understanding of the disabled body and how it is interpreted in terms of physical ability and appearance.⁶¹ The Loathly Lady's loathsomeness is rooted in her desire for sexual intercourse despite her lack of sexual desirability.

The Loathly Lady, as Feinstein states, is deliberately grotesque in her sexual appetite. She is not simply a fantastical or comic figure, as she always has a didactic function within whatever text she appears. She is a shapeshifter who alternates between the two medieval states of a woman's life in reverse; she is first the hideous old hag, and then the idealized maiden. As Passmore points out, this is not just an element of whimsy but the sexually active conceptual manifestation of ideas about control and "personal power politics" that exists only in the imagination.⁶² Her didactic function teaches the reader and the characters in her narrative about the disparity between inner and outer beauty, as well as beauty's relation to personal and political sovereignty.⁶³ Her instructional function and her relationship to sovereignty shows the beginning of the evolution of sovereignty within the Loathly Lady tales. The didactic message of these texts speaks to the moral and physical integrity of the king-figure or hero. While Florent does provide a moral exemplum for Amans and the reader, the Loathly Lady also provides an important ethical model which shows the inappropriate nature of his desire. On first reading the tale, the reader may assume that Florent is an idealized double of

⁶¹ Pearman, *Women*, 2.

⁶² Passmore, "Introduction," xiii.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

Amans, designed to show him how to perform as a romantic lover. Further consideration reveals a much closer identification between Amans and the Loathly lady due to their shared relationship with disability.

The medieval understanding of disability survives in texts that by twenty-first century standards come across as both misogynist and ableist. Gender and disability were social constructions that are intimately connected with the individual human body. Beauty, femininity, disfigurement, and disability were all social constructions that were formed and regulated by religious doctrine and medical texts that were influenced by religious rhetoric.⁶⁴ As Pearman writes, “the biblical, medical, and literary representations of the female body merge with the Aristotlian construction of the female body as a deformed male, a web of Otherness begins to surface, demonstrating the intricate bonds between discursive notions of embodied identity categories such as gender, sex, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity.”⁶⁵ Gower’s *Loathly Lady* evokes issues of gender, class, ableism, and ageism.

The nature of beauty is in question, as well as to whom this beauty belongs: from her first appearance as an Irish sovereignty myth, as discussed in greater detail in the first chapter of this thesis, her physical appearance presents a moral challenge for the protagonist that proves his nobility or right to political sovereignty. In the English tradition, the focus turns to personal sovereignty. Initially, the *Loathly Lady* in Gower’s “*Tale of Florent*” performs a similar function to her Irish counterparts: she offers Florent, the idealized young knight, an opportunity to display the quality of his character. This enables him to fulfil his role as an example of noble behavior for the aspiring lover

⁶⁴ Pearman, *Women*, 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Amans, to whom Genius narrates the story. The final revelation of Amans' age and identity at the end of Book VIII invites us to reconsider the relationship between the characters of the Loathly Lady story and the narrating voices of the *Confessio Amantis*.

The Loathly Lady is described by the narrating Genius as:

Hire nase bass, hire browes hyhe,
Hire yhen smale and depe set,
Hire chekes ben with teres wet,
And rivelen as an emty skyn
Hangende down unto the chin,
Hire lippes schrunken ben for age,
Ther was no grace in the visage.
Hir front was nargh, hir lockes hore,
Sche loketh forth as doth a More,
Hire necke is schort, hir schuldres courbe -
That myhte a mannes lust destourbe!
Hire body gret and nothing smal,
And schortly to describe hire al,
Sche hath no lith withoute a lak;
Bot lich unto the wollesak (I.1678-1692)

There are three textual reasons to draw a connection between Amans and the Loathly Lady: the descriptions of their faces, the descriptions of their bodies, and their implied infertility. The physical description of the Loathly Lady occurs when she is first encountered in the "Tale of Florent." The physical description of Amans does not occur until the denouement of Book VIII. Although these descriptions are books apart, they are thematically and structurally very similar. There are also two distinct differences. Amans is a man whereas the Loathly Lady is a woman. The Loathly Lady is successful in her romantic exploits and Amans is forced to resign from romantic love.

Gower follows medieval conventions of literary description by approaching his characters from the tops of their heads and working down, similar to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's example in the *Poetria Nova*, which gives an example of how to describe a beautiful woman,

starting from the head and progressing downward.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, a marked difference between his descriptions of Amans and the Loathly Lady may be tied to their respective genders. Gower's description of Amans' is limited to his head, whereas he includes a rather detailed description of the Loathly Lady's entire body. This is due to the social implications of their different genders. Amans is a man, who is able to make intellectual and valuable contributions to society despite his advanced chronological age. The Loathly Lady's social worth is based on her body, which is too large and cumbersome to fit into the paradigm of a conventional romantic love interest. The description of the Loathly Lady is also intentionally more detailed and hyperbolic in order to create a greater sense of disgust in the reader.

The description that Gower provides of Amans' aged face is not grotesque. The description he provides of himself is in fact strikingly similar to that of the mature archer [Figure 1]. The physical description of Amans/ Gower's face focuses on his dismay at the presence of wrinkles which are present throughout his face, his thin cheeks, and grey hair. The description of the Loathly Lady's is much longer and more detailed than the one provided of Amans, yet there are still some similarities. As Feinstein points out, her nose is elongated (I. 1678), her small eyes are watery and deep-set (I. 1679), her cheeks are wrinkled and form jowls (I. 1680-1682), her lips have thinned with age (I. 1683), her face is haggard (I. 1685).⁶⁷ These characteristics are all associated with advanced age.

Both of these characters' faces are withered and diminished. Additionally, both seem to suffer from some sort of ocular impairment, as the Loathly Lady's eyes are described as "Hire yhen smale and depe set,/Hire chekes ben with teres wet," (I. 1679-1680). This is textually and

⁶⁶ Geoffroy of Vinsauf, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*, trans. Ernest Gallo (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 45-46.

⁶⁷ Feinstein, "Longevity," 28-29.

thematically similar to Gower's description of Amans' (his own) eyes as "Myn yhen dymme and al unglade/ Mi chiekes thinne, and al my face" (VIII. 2826-2827). Given Gower's deliberately chosen and biographical experience with blindness, this is a remarkable textual link between the two characters. Another similarity lays in his choice of vocabulary. He describes the Loathly Lady's cheeks as "rivelen" (I. 1861), he uses this same adjective to describe the entirety of Amans' face "riveled" (VIII. 2829). The description of her face emphasizes how she is perceived by others, particularly a potential but unenthusiastic sexual partner such as Florent, whereas the description of Amans directs attention to the subjective experience and effects of these characteristics.

Although the descriptions of their faces are remarkably similar and are both detailed over the course of six lines (I.1678-1684) (VIII. 2826-2831), the description of the Loathly Lady's face is far more detailed and subsequently more grotesque. The description of the Loathly Lady focuses on the physicality of her face, whereas the account of Amans focuses on the emotional or internal effects of these characteristics. The differences between the two descriptions are rooted in their gender. As Burrow has discussed at length, there are a variety of stages in a man's life with corresponding roles to play, as Gower discusses at the end the final Book (VIII.2843-2862). These options and stages do not exist for a woman in the medieval period. As Pearman explains in the introduction to her book, women were seen as defective versions of males whose genitals are reversed.⁶⁸ To simplify a heavily nuanced argument women were seen as corrupted, deformed, or disabled mirror images of men.⁶⁹ As such, the description of the Loathly Lady is providing an intentionally inverted representation of Amans that goes into greater and more grotesque detail because of she is a woman.

⁶⁸ Pearman, *Women*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-11.

The description of the Loathly Lady spans I. 1675- 1692, with the description of her face ranging from I. 1678-1684, six lines of a seventeen-line description. Amans' description of himself ranges from VIII. 2826-2831, spanning six lines with the final line mentioning his grey hair. The length of these descriptions is a stark contrast to the lack of physical descriptions of other characters within the text, such as Florent. Although a lengthy description of Florent is provided at the beginning of the tale (I. 1408- 1417), we are not provided with any physical details, but rather those pertaining to his knightly exploits. We, the readers, do not know what Florent looks like. We assume that he is handsome in the same way that we would assume that Amans is young: he is a conventional romantic lover. This stands in contrast to both Amans and the Loathly Lady, whose physical appearances are constantly expanded upon or made reference to within their narratives, such as when the Loathly Lady is prepared for her wedding (I. 1745- 1751). For Amans these further descriptions appear with the taunting of Venus as an indication of his own age and physical deficiency. Both of their descriptions are expanded upon only to further show their physical inability to function as a conventional romantic lover. This is particularly apparent after the Loathly Lady's transformation. Instead of lines detailing her beauty, the Loathly Lady is given hardly any physical description, only that she is:

Of eyhtetiene wynter age,
Which was the faireste of visage
That evere in al this world he syh (I. 1803-1805)

Like Florent, the conventional warrants no real description. As Amans is provided with no physical description at the beginning of the text, there is no reason to assume that he is anything other than conventional because the reader is unable to see him as such. Genius knows the true nature of Amans because he is acting as Amans' confessor, he is the personification of 'genius,' and he is an extension of the poet John Gower, as is Amans. For both Amans and the Loathly

Lady, their true form is revealed only in the presence of Love. For the Loathly Lady, that is her obedient husband, Florent. For Amans, that is the scornful personification of Love, Venus.

A shared physical characteristic of Amans and the Loathly Lady that is mentioned multiple times in their respective narratives is their grey hair. Grey hair is a visual marker that the individual is past the early stages of life. Within the *Confessio Amantis*, references to grey hair are found in the Latin verses in Book VIII,

Conueniens igitur foret, vt quos cana senectus
Attigit, vltius corpora casta colant.” (iii. 9-10)

(It would be appropriate, therefore, for those whom white old age touches henceforth to cultivate chaste bodies. Peck’s translation in footnote 1 page 205)

The revelation of Amans, the description of the Loathly, and the images of Gower are the emphasis on their grey hair. Grey hair seems to have been Gower’s signature look. All of the illuminated images of Gower have grey or white hair. This emphasis on grey hair is a deliberate link between Gower, Amans, and the Loathly Lady because it is a universally acknowledged hallmark of old age, acting as a cultural separation of the individual from youth and sexual desirability, as is made clear when the Loathly Lady is being prepared for her wedding to Florent. Her grey hair is covered for the wedding, which made her look even worse (I. 1755-1759).

Gower uses an extensive vocabulary in the *Confessio Amantis*, which allows him to use several ways to describe Amans’ grey hair. For example, when Venus calls him the fourteenth century equivalent of ‘an old grey mare that ain’t what she used to be’:

And thogh thou feigne a yong corage,
It scheweth wel be the visage
That olde grisel is no fole (VIII. 2405-2407)

He also uses Latin to describe grey hair “gelidis hirsuta capillis.”⁷⁰ However, it is the word ‘hore’ that he chooses to describe both his own hair, “I syh also myn heres hore” (VIII. 2831) and that of the Loathly lady, who is also described as having “hir lockes hore,” (I. 1685). This word is used as a pun and a lynchpin for the *Confessio Amantis* by Venus, who again mocks Amans saying, “For loves lust and lockes hore” (VIII. 2403), which is a reference to the beginning of the *Confessio Amantis* which sets out to present a book “Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,” (Prologue 19).

Of the seventeen-line description of the Loathly Lady, seven lines are spent commenting on her body (I.1686-1692), which describe her as fat, drooping, and sexually repulsive. She is dark (I. 1686), acutely hunched over (I. 1687-1688) and very large (I.1689) In comparison to the lack of description of idealized or conventional characters, her body takes up as much room in the text as it would in real life. The account of her body highlights the defects and the deformities that make her an inappropriate love interest for Florent, as she is not sexually desirable or fertile due to her old age.

The Loathly Lady “hath no lith withoute a lak;” (I. 1691) while describing Amans, he writes “That ther was nothing full ne plein,” (VIII. 2830). The summations of both descriptions include these lines; they are similar in structure as well as content. Both passages paint a detailed picture of their time-ravaged subjects, giving an explicit explanation as to why both would be unable to function as a romantic lover. The Loathly Lady is first presented as so ravaged by old age that she has been robbed not only of her femininity, but of her humanity as well. She is first described as “a creature” (I.1529), a “wommannysch figure” (I. 1530), and “So foul yit syh he nevere non” (I. 1532). Her entire body is affected by old age as she “Is old and lothly overall” (I.

⁷⁰ Gower, *Confessio*, 205. Line 3 Latin Verses Book VIII.

1713). There is no redeeming quality about her body. Instead, her value comes from the knowledge that she used to save Florent and the didactic lesson that he learned.

Amans' body does not receive commentary. His body is irrelevant because it is not the embodiment or the physical representation of his social worth. His worth, his contributions to society, are intellectual and thus limited to his head. The emphasis on the body of the Loathly Lady is indicative of her only value as a woman, which is as an object of male sexual desire and control. Her physical desirability is her only source of social mobility or security, which is provided through her social (marriage) contract with a man. As Feinstein points out, the Loathly Lady is post-menopausal and thus unable to bear children. This is yet another physical impairment that disables her from functioning as a romantic love interest or valuable woman in medieval society.⁷¹ To paraphrase Pearman, to be a woman is to be disabled.⁷² By this logic, an old woman is doubly devalued.

Each part of the Loathly Lady's body has something wrong with it because of her age. It is having to marry her at her advanced age and the accompanying impairments which makes her hideous to Florent. In contrast to the focus of this description of Amans being on the head and the intellect, Gower focuses predominantly on the body of the Loathly Lady, because a woman's value is so closely tied in this world to her physical desirability as a lover and her fecundity as a mother, which is a further contrast to the impotence of Amans. Feminist Disability Studies includes multifaceted understandings of the cultural perception of the female body. Fertility is an aspect of 'normalcy,' which is privileged.⁷³ With her restoration to a fertile and beautiful young woman, the Loathly Lady has undergone the magical equivalent of aesthetic surgery. Rosemarie

⁷¹ Feinstein, "Ladies," 24.

⁷² Pearman, *Women*, 1-2.

⁷³ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 1-32, 4.

Garland-Thomson's application of Feminist Disability theory is reflected in the lack of individualized physical characteristics on the part of the Loathly Lady after her transformation.

She is only described in terms of a conventional romantic paradigm in which she now fits:

Of eyhtetiene wynter age,
Which was the faireste of visage
That evere in al this world he syh (I.1803-1805)

Aesthetic surgery within the context of feminist disability studies reflects the gendered ideology and standards of the culture.⁷⁴ Building on this perspective, the restoration of the Loathly Lady's youth has served to "normate" her by "eliminat[ing] disability and enforce[ing] the ideals of what might be thought of as the normalcy system."⁷⁵ By virtue of the young knight learning a didactic message, the youth and beauty of the Loathly Lady are restored through curative magic.

Amans' impotence is neither medically nor magically tended to, although it is both alluded to and directly stated. At the end of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower writes "That y am feble and impotent" (VIII. 3127). While this may mean simply 'powerless,' Amans' inability to perform sexually is alluded to in the taunts of Venus. She describes him as physically unable to be a romantic lover: "Whan that thou art noght sufficient/ To holde love his covenant." (VIII. 2419-2420). Gower describes old age as a being a physical impairment in the Latin verses of Book VIII, in the section that Peck labels as 'Old Age,'⁷⁶ Gower describes his physical state as

⁷⁴ Garland-Thomson, "Integrating," 10.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁶ Qvi cupit id quod habere nequit, sua tempora perdit,

Est vbi non posse, velle salute caret.

Non estatis opus gelidis hirsuta capillis,

Cum calor abcessit, equiperabit hiems;

Sicut habet Mayus non dat natura Decembri,

Nec poterit compar floribus esse lutum;

Sic neque decrepita senium iuvenile voluptas

Floret in obsequium, quod Venus ipsa petit.

Conueniens igitur foret, vt quos cana senectus

Attigit, vltorius corpora casta colant.

Gower, *Confessio*, 205.

“Est vbi non posse, velle salute caret.” (Where "I'm able" is absent, "I want" is unhealthy)⁷⁷. This can be read as yet another reference to the sexual impotence that comes along with old age.

The curse of the Loathly Lady's old age and subsequent physical appearance extends to Florent, making him impotent as well. Her appearance “destroys his lust” (I.1688), as Feinstein points out, his youth will be wasted (I.1711) on a wife who “Is old and lothly overall” (I.1713). Her ugliness, her infertility, and Florent's subsequent impotency are all caused by her age, which causes Feinstein to place sexual intercourse with the Loathly Lady as “unnatural,” “purposeless,” and going against the established social order.⁷⁸ Through Florent's ability to control his lust or body and fulfil his marital duties causes the physical reversal of the curse of old age (I. 1790-1797). He is given a choice: she can be beautiful either during the day and ugly during the night, or vice versa. Instead of making the decision for himself, he tells her to make the decision for both of them (I. 1821-1831). It is obedience to the Loathly Lady's lust that causes her to reveal her true form as an idealized princess, and it is his obedience to her as his wife, in allowing her sovereignty over her physical appearance that breaks the curse that caused her loathliness. The Loathly Lady is not actually an old woman: her age, ugliness, and subsequent infertility was caused by a magic curse that was placed on her by her jealous stepmother (I. 1841-1852). By winning the love and sovereignty of the most chivalrous knight (I. 1845-1849), her youth and beauty would be permanently restored to her (I. 1836-1838). It was this final deed that not only reversed the curse but proved Florent's identity as a truly idealized romantic lover and knight (I. 1851).

⁷⁷ Gower, *Confessio*, 205, footnote 3.

⁷⁸ Feinstein, “Longevity,” 29.

Florent is in one of the early stages of life and thus fits the convention of a youthful courtly lover within the paradigm of the Romantic literary genre. The Ages of Man *topos* discussed by Burrow presents the stages of a man's life that have corresponding expectations and functions within society for men as they age.⁷⁹ This is a very gendered system, not only due to the title of this system, but also because no such model exists for a female life. This indicates respect for the male aging process and a lack of respect, if not revulsion, for the female aging process. It is possible to interpret the process of female aging as stigmatized within medieval society, as is evident by the scarcity of positive mature female role models. Gower includes the Four Good Women and the end of the Parliament of Lovers, yet this seems to only highlight the lack of a positive maturity process for women in the rest of the *Confessio Amantis*.

At the end of the Procession of Lovers in Book VIII, the personification of Old Age, named Elde by Gower, leads a procession of great philosophers who are described as "The moste part were of gret age,/And that was sene in the visage" (VIII. 2671-2672) yet none of them, even Elde, are described as having grey hair. These figures of wisdom and old age provide a model of acceptable ageing for men, whereas women have fewer positive models and are more defined by the desirability of their looks and the fecundity of their bodies. After the list of traditional romantic lovers, Gower does provide a list of four good examples of mature female love:

Penelope (VIII. 2621-2631), Locrine (VIII. 2632-2639), Alceste (VIII. 2640- 2646), and Alcione

⁷⁹ To simplify a very complicated concept, John Burrow has identified that the Late Middle Ages recognized four main traditions. Each of these traditions or models partitioned the Life of a man into different ages. In the more well-known models, there could be between three to seven stages. The first age(s) are associated with growth, physical energy, love, and foolishness. Wisdom, and a priority for social and civic responsibilities (such as politics and marriage), develops during the middle-age, if the number of divisions is limited to three or four, or in one or more periods of "old age" (in schema with six, seven, or more divisions), as physical strength and reason/experience govern actions. In the final stages, physical impairments result in decrepitude. This causes a loss of physical strength and ability, often resulting in a state of helplessness that is associated with childhood and infancy. Summarized and cited by Yeager, "Winter," 90-91.

(VIII. 2647-2656). Gower does not extoll them for their beauty, but rather the beauty of their character through their obedience and support given to their husbands. These women serve as a transition between the company of Youth and the group of philosophers brought forth by Elde. Even though these women are idealized representations of mature womanhood, they do not have any specific physical details. They are not described in terms of personal details, but only in terms of function related to their successful support of their husbands. Their lack of physicality stands in stark contrast to the description of the Loathly Lady, which also differs from the description of Amans. The physical details provided in the revelation of Amans are limited to his head, the rest of his body is not described. This indicates that his function and purpose lays not in his body, but in intellectual endeavors of the mind. The body of the Loathly Lady is described in great and unflattering detail. Again, the inclusion of this description seems to exaggerate her deviance from the conventional expectations of the reader.

The lack of positive female models of aging is apparent in the "Tale of Florent." However, there are examples from which we can begin to piece together a tentative Ages of Woman *topos*. Initially, the model within the tale reinforces the 'bad' model for women as they age. The Loathly Lady provides the potential to transform this stigmatized social construction. The Princess, the first identity of the Loathly Lady, is the idealized youthful beauty in the first stage of life. The corresponding expectation would be to become a heteronormative romantic love interest, as seen in the early stages of the Ages of Man *topos*.

Her stepmother, who would be queen in her own right after her husband died, is socially and magically powerful. It was she who placed the curse of old age on the Princess, turning her into the Loathly Lady (I.1841-1849). No physical description is provided of the stepmother. Given that her legitimate stepdaughter was a teenager at the time of the king's death, it is likely

that she was very beautiful not very long ago. Her marriage may have also been a May-January arrangement, as the King has left behind a daughter who was “Of eyhtetiene wynter age” (I.1803). As in the various middle stages of the Ages of Man *topos*, the stepmother is focused on social power and political responsibility, as she is a queen. The stepmother provides a bad example of the middle stage of a woman’s life, when she is not a youthful beauty but is not a crone.

While there are two old women in the “Tale of Florent,” only one of them is chronologically old. Branchus’ grandmother is another negative model of female aging. She suffers from the physical impairments that correspond to the later stages of the Ages of Man *topos* as well as the anxiety surrounding the stereotype of powerful and manipulative old woman discussed by Feinstein.⁸⁰

Ther was a lady, the slyheste
Of alle that men knewe tho,
So old sche myhte unethes go, (I. 1442-1444)

Branchus’ granddame fulfills the stereotype proposed by Feinstein. She also possesses the physical impairments of the final stages of the Ages of Man *topos*.

The Loathly Lady provides the opportunity to form a different example of female aging. She is not going to age in the same manner that the stepmother and the grandmother have, because she will not lose her beauty:

That nevere hierafter schal be lassed
Mi beauté, which that I now have,
Til I be take into my grave; (I.1836-1838)

Her beauty will remain with her until her death. This does not mean that she is ageless, as she has already crossed the threshold into maturity through her marriage and her actions towards Florent.

⁸⁰ Feinstein, “Longevity,” 25.

The Loathly Lady has already shown similar behavior to the Four Good Women included by Gower between the end of the Parliament of Lovers and the procession of Old Age in Book VIII. She faithfully waited for Florent to return to her (I.1672-1673), like Penelope [sic] famously waited for her husband (VIII. 2628-2631). By initially giving Florent control over the decision about her body (I.1810-1813) she is like Lucrece (VIII. 2635- 2638) because she was willing to give up control of her body to protect Florent from shame. She saved Florent from death (I. 1545-1546) like Alceste saved her husband (VIII. 2643-2645). Finally, like Alcione (VIII. 2650-2656) her physical form permanently changed in order to be with her husband forever (I. 1832-1840). As the Loathly Lady is not going to age in the traditional sense and her behavior differs from the 'Age of Woman' *topos* provided in the text, the Loathly Lady offers a model of positive female aging. Her behavior is modeled from that of the Four Good Women and is helpful to her husband. Florent's donation of sovereignty in allowing her to choose her physical form shows the improvement of his character from the beginning of the text. He allows her to make the decision for both instead of choosing to have her beautiful during the day for social pleasure or beautiful at night for sexual pleasure (I. 1821-1831). This shows wisdom and maturity on his part. With his partnership and marriage to the Loathly Lady, Florent has become a better person and has progressed into a new stage of life.

Although she was restored to her youth and beauty, the Loathly Lady had remained in this form for quite a while (I.1842), she has acquired the wisdom and constancy of old age. In Amans' vision of the Parliament of Lovers, she would not be ranked among the famous or tragic beauties of antiquity. Instead, she would be categorized among the Four Good Women (VIII. 2620-2625), whose goodness stems from the wisdom which stems from their faithfulness and support of their husbands. The once Loathly Lady becomes the ideal wife.

The *Confessio Amantis* contains a "web of contrasts which bind and unite the poem."⁸¹ One such contrast within the "Tale of Florent" is an inversion of a traditional Fabliau trope, the *mals mariés*, which comedically present a tale of an aged gap relationship between a sexually voracious and grotesque older figure and a beautiful and reluctant younger one. Another textual example for a tale that borrows the fabliau trope of the *mals mariés*, or badly married, is Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale." This tale shows the conventional pairing of a lecherous older man, Januarie, with a younger beautiful woman, May. Like the transformed Loathly Lady, she is not yet twenty. He, like Amans, is a mature man "And sixty yeer a wyflee man was hee" (1248)⁸² who seeks intimate fulfilment that is inappropriate. Unlike the sympathetic Amans or the Loathly Lady, Januarie is simply wretched as he participates "In love, which nys but childyssh vanytee."⁸³ The tale itself contains raunchy sexual content, which situates it in the Fabliau genre. The theme of obedience creates another interesting parallel between the two tales. Instead of courtly obedience of the Knight Florent to his Lady, the harsh realism of Januarie's expectation of marriage serves to heighten his grotesque nature. He expects his wife to be completely subservient to him: "She seith nat ones 'nay,' whan he seith 'ye.'/ 'Do this,' seith he; 'Al redy, sire,' seith she." (133-134). Within the "Tale of Florent," the partnership of Florent and the Loathly Lady is a choice. It is not an easy choice, nor is it an initially happy choice. However, both figures do receive what they look for out of the union and find true happiness in each other (I. 1853-1861).

⁸¹ Paul M. Clogan, "From Complaint to Satire: The Art of the *Confessio Amantis*," in *Medievalia Et Humanistica* 4 (1973): 221.

⁸² Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Merchant's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 64.

Gower may have included the Loathly Lady as a didactic figure, implying that physical impairments and old age are irrelevant if the young lover is truly obedient to the older partner. It is more likely that Genius intends to show Amans how grotesque and comical he appears in his lust as an old and impotent lover. Or, as Feinstein proposes, Genius is trying to show Amans that he should obey the object of his love and not contact her anymore.⁸⁴ It would take magical intervention to reverse the curse of old age, which only exists in the realm of romantic fantasy. The Loathly Lady may provide a fantasy for the aged Gower, implying that if he found a devoted partner that he may be restored by love's embrace.

Conclusion

The description of Januarie is an excellent account of an old man as an inappropriate lover, which offers a useful comparison to the Loathly Lady and to Amans. Both the Loathly Lady and Amans desire not just physical love, but romantic love as well. For example, after their wedding, the still Loathly Lady says to Florent "That thou schalt be my worldes blisse," (I. 1771). Although the lines surrounding this quote are heavy with sexual implication, there is a very present emotional fondness in her enthusiasm for Florent. This emotional connotation helps them to appear sympathetic. Januarie is interested only in the carnal aspects of love, which makes him appear even more repulsive in his sexual desires. Januarie is grotesque in a way that the depiction of Amans/ Gower is not because Amans does not focus on the sexual nature of love, but rather the social construct. This can be seen in the structure of the book, as well as in the figure of Genius, who is both the priest of Venus and must teach the lesson of the Seven Deadly Sins. "Genius signifies the only sin which the Lover does not confess." This is the sin of Lust. All the other Seven Deadly Sins have an entire book dedicated to them, yet this most carnal

⁸⁴ Feinstein, "Longevity," 30.

and applicable sin is absent. Gower may have deliberately distanced Amans from the sin of Lust because he not only wants us to see Amans/ Gower as too old to be a lover, but also wants to associate him with the dignity and gravity of a wise old man who can be a counsellor.

Amans, and Gower, are not magically cursed, but have grown into their old age. As they have reached their old age naturally, he must accept that it is irreversible or incurable. Although there are many allusions to blindness within the *Confessio Amantis*, this impairment as well as Amans' / Gower's physical appearance does not mean that he is now inept, it means that he must accept the responsibilities associated with the stage of the Ages of Man *topos* in which he now recognizes himself. As Gower alludes to in the beginning of the section on Old Age, as well as at the end of Book VIII, his age makes him unable to physically function as a romantic lover. Instead, it is his duty as a more mature member of society to leave behind the sexual desires and frivolity associated with youth. His inability to be romantically or sexually active has allowed him to become morally and intellectually active, which is how Gower wants to be seen. His advanced age allows the romantic elements of the narrative to be displaced by the didacticism of the tales or *exempla*, highlighting instead the political and social instruction that Gower intended to bestow on the young Richard II.

Through the practical guidance of a wiser, older man, Richard II could progress from his youthful chronological age into a more mature and politically astute stage, much as the Loathly Lady does for Florent. Florent and the Loathly Lady transform each other by bringing each other into a different stage of life. For Florent, he has moved into the age of maturity as a happily married man. The Loathly Lady has regressed from an old woman to a blushing young bride who is physically ready and willing to fulfil the social expectations of this stage of her life: to become a socially respectable wife and mother. Although the *mals mariés* trope mocks the idea of a

May-January relationship, the “Tale of Florent” has inverted both the gender roles and the dynamic of the two figures. Although the Loathly Lady is sexually voracious, grotesque, and comical, she inspires good behavior and teaches the young Florent a positive moral lesson. This is a direct contrast to the lecherous Januarie.

The “Tale of Florent” shows a May-January relationship that is built on the fulfilling of promises and the ability to help one another. Although Florent is more than reluctant to enter into this relationship with the Loathly Lady, both figures benefit from and shape one another. The greatest subversion of the *mals mariés* trope with this tale is the dynamic of the relationship, which ultimately results in happy companionship. As Gower likely experienced in his own May-January relationship, this companionship can act as a prosthesis for the older person. The younger, abled-bodied person can help their partner function satisfactorily within an ableist society. This form of relationship also experiences its own share of stigma because it functions outside of the conventions of heteronormativity due to the infertility of a partner.

The May-January marriage in “Tale of Florent” has a biographical connection to Gower. Several years after the publication of the *Confessio Amantis*, he entered into his own May-December marriage with a much younger woman, which is one of the few concrete biographical pieces of information that exists about Gower. Although it is impossible to judge Gower’s physical health or sexual capabilities, snippets of autobiographical material can be taken from his later (and not often read) Latin poems which may allude to his sexual limitations. “Est amour” (Love is) can be confidently dated to 1398, the year of his marriage to Agnes Groundolf.⁸⁵ The poem concludes “hinc vetus annorum Gower sub spe meritorum/ Ordine sponsorum tutus adhibo thorum” (Thus I, Gower, old in years, hope in favor/ Safely approach the marriage bed in the

⁸⁵ Yeager, “Winter,” 93.

order of husbands).⁸⁶ This poem also appears in a slightly altered version in the *Vox Clamantis* V.53 ff, where it is used to dissuade knights from devoting their attentions to women when they should be using their skills for the good of society. The poem “Est amor” details the struggle of the poet to contain the “self-destructive energies of amorous attraction” as marking them as inappropriate for him to act upon due to his advanced age.⁸⁷

Within the “Tale of Florent” Gower has transformed old age to youth, which is perhaps something that he hoped for later in life. At the time of his marriage to Agnes Groundolf in 1398, Gower was well into his sixties, possibly even seventy years old. There is no existing evidence that Gower had been married previously, nor is there any mention of children in his will. Little information survives about Agnes Groundolf, but based on what little biographical information survives, Gower and his wife seemed to have been genuinely fond of one another. Yeager acknowledges that scholars such as John Hines, Eve Salisbury, and others view the relationship of Agnes and Gower as that of a nurse and a patient, but this dynamic is not universal for age-gap relationships, nor does it negate the possibility of love between them.⁸⁸

Perhaps the moral of the “Tale of Florent” is less about obedience in sexual love, and more about obedience in a partnership. Like Alceste and the other four good women, the Loathly Lady utilizes the virtue of obedience to save her husband’s life, yet this is not a simple one-way devotion, but a more realistic example of obedience in a factual relationship based on giving and taking. She saves his life, which is fantastical, but by honoring his promise to her, he restores her to her true self. Neither the Loathly Lady nor Florent were passive in their tale, they helped each other to obtain what they wanted: he wanted to live, and she wanted be herself again. She shows

⁸⁶ Yeager, “Winter,” 93. His translation.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

us that the beauty of character does not fade. Together, they resolved the problems they faced and found happiness in one another.

Tho was plesance and joye ynowh,
Echon with other pleide and lowh;
Thei live longe and wel thei ferde, (I. 1853-1855)

As Gower wrote, they lived Happily Ever After.

Chapter III: The Wife of Bath's Loathly Conduct: Chaucer's Loathly Lady Tale as Conduct

Literature

Introduction

Scholars such as Mary Carruthers and Marion Turner have acknowledged a perceived disconnect between the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and her "Tale," as an elevated Arthurian romance initially seems out of character for the bawdy Wife of Bath to tell. This chapter proposes a definitive link between the two texts. Chaucer borrowed from multiple contemporary literary genres while creating the Tales told by his pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. The connection between the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and "Tale" can be found when each is viewed as a form of gendered conduct literature, a contemporaneously popular literary genre that reflected the nascent social mobility of the bourgeois class to which both Chaucer and the Wife belonged. While Alastair Minnis interprets Chaucer's Loathly Lady as "the guardian of truth and honor" who is a "contrast with John Gower's "Tale of Florent," wherein the *trouthe* of the historic knight constitutes the moral center of gravity," this is not the case.¹ By looking through the lens of conduct literature, Mary Carruthers's long accepted argument that it is inappropriate to see the Loathly Lady as an avatar for the Wife of Bath can be negated.² In this chapter, the Loathly Lady emerges as a didactic avatar for the Wife of Bath, who is therefore the "moral center of gravity." This is evocative of the relationship between John Gower and Amans, his textual avatar within the *Confessio Amantis*, and thus provides a further link between the two Loathly Lady tales. While Susan Carter writes that although Chaucer was "not using the Wife of

¹ Alastair Minnis, "The Lusts of Loathly Damsels: Sovereignty as Sexual Possession," in *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and the Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 313–15, 313.

² Mary Carruthers, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," *PMLA* 94, no. 2 (1979): 209–22, 218.

Bath to present his own views, he allows her to express radical ideas on gender theory and to tell a tale that demonstrates some of what she has theorized.”³ While this is a plausible feminist reading, other interpretations are equally so. Through the lens of disability studies, the Loathly Lady is used by Chaucer to argue for temperance and humane behavior towards women and their bodies.

This chapter proposes that “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and “Tale” are linked due to elements of gendered conduct literature which are central in both texts. The first section of this chapter examines the Wife of Bath as a disabled and aging narrator who represents a lived female experience who suffered abuse and impairments as a direct result of the genre. This section highlights the parodic elements of female conduct literature found in the “Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue,’” as well as the dangers that living “by the book” could pose to the female body. The second section focuses on the Wife of Bath’s “Tale” as a form of male gendered conduct literature. The parodic elements present in the Tale negate the omnipresence of masculine authority within Arthurian romance. This makes the didactic message more universal and applicable to all genders. From this, the Loathly Lady emerges as the Wife of Bath’s textual avatar who instructs the Knight and the reader on how to be a better person.

This element of instruction in a romantic setting is not only a key element of male conduct literature, as established by Roberta L. Kreuger, it is also central to the Loathly Lady motif.⁴ Although Carruthers established a tradition of not reading the Loathly Lady as an avatar for the Wife of Bath, the Loathly Lady serves as an avatar for the Wife of Bath in the same way

³ Susan Carter, “Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *The Chaucer Review* 37, no. 4 (2003): 329–45, 329.

⁴ Roberta L. Kreuger, “Introduction: Teach Your Children Well: Medieval Conduct Guides for Youths.” in *Medieval Conduct Literature: An Anthology of Vernacular Guides to Behavior for Youths, with English Translations*, ed. Mark D. Johnston (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) ix–xxxiii, ix–xi.

that Amans serves as a textual avatar for John Gower.⁵ Additionally, they are both inappropriate lovers. Gower/Amans was able to age and progress to another stage of the Ages of Man *topos* in which his intellect becomes more valued and he gains even more social respect even though he describes himself as a “burel clerk” who decided “to wryte a bok” (Prologue 51-52), which Peck qualifies as simultaneously describing the coarse fabric worn by a lay clerk as well as his ignorance. The Wife of Bath can be read as a direct response to the biographical elements included by Gower in the *Confessio Amantis*. She and Gower/ Amans are both middle-aged and middle-class. Both desire a romantic sexual relationship although they do not fit the physical requirements of traditional Romantic love interests. Both the Wife of Bath and Gower have acquired disabilities, deafness and blindness, which are associated with old age. While the Wife of Bath acquired a hearing impairment at the hands of a clerk, Gower, a clerk, first became blind by his own hand, albeit in a literary sense. Given these parallels between the two narrative figures, Gower’s influence on “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” takes on greater significance: the Wife is not just critiquing the application of conduct literature, she is responding to the clerks who write intentionally morally and behaviorally instructive literature. The direct parallel between the aged Gower and the Wife of Bath is further strengthened by the remarkable similarity between the two Loathly Lady tales. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath can be read as directly responding to and building upon Gower’s “Tale of Florent.”

It is essential to understand that the character does not exist without the narrator. The Loathly Lady in “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” is not simply Chaucer’s interpretation, she is the Wife’s expression of the Loathly Lady story. Chaucer created the Wife of Bath’s female voice by combining his knowledge of rhetoric and esoteric topics with practical, experiential knowledge

⁵ Carruthers, “Lion,” 209–222.

that can be found in female conduct literature. His use of parodic elements bridges the gender divide to create a universally moralizing Tale that teaches everyone, regardless of gender or social status, how to treat the poor, the disabled, the elderly, or the Other. This is unique to the genre of conduct literature, as the “Tale” does not fit into a singular gendered category. The Wife of Bath uses rhetoric and abstract concepts to present wisdom that she has gained through practical experience. This presentation makes the didactic message of the “Tale” applicable to all genders because disabled and elderly people existed in all levels of society. Based on this reading, Chaucer may have chosen the Wife of Bath to present this “Tale” because she also blurs lines of gender, class, and (dis)ability.

By incorporating elements of conduct literature in the Wife’s “Prologue” and “Tale,” Chaucer creates a firm link between his version and the intentionally didactic “Tale of Florent,” which also deals with issues of class, ageism, and disability. The connection between Gower’s and Chaucer’s versions of the Loathly Lady tale is undeniable. The two tales follow nearly identical plots with similar characters and didactic messages. R. F. Yeager writes that the “Tale of Florent” “is the nearest extant analogue to “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale.’”⁶ The two tales are often discussed together, yet a key similarity has been ignored. Both Loathly Lady tales are told by a disabled voice. Yeager and Jonathan Hsy are the primary scholars to actively engage with Gower as a disabled author. As established in the previous chapter, John Gower the poet appropriates impairments and characteristics of old age to obtain their associated social connotations. In the *Confessio Amantis*, he applies these to Amans, his avatar, to cast him as an inappropriate romantic lover. This forces him to embrace the behaviors and expectations associated with a

⁶ R. F. Yeager, “The Politics of ‘Strengthe’ and ‘Vois’ in Gower’s Loathly Lady Tale,” in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 42–72, 42.

learned respectable middle-aged man. This is a new and valuable stage in what J.A. Burrow defines as the Ages of Man *topos*.⁷ As discussed in the last chapter, there is no corresponding Ages of Woman *topos*. Coincidentally, the Wife of Bath would be about the same age as Gower/Amans, but she does not have a positive societal “stage” to enter due to her sex. She can only become an old woman like the Loathly Lady.

This chapter proposes that the seemingly mismatched “Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and “Tale” were purposefully put together by Chaucer to offer a female perspective of the progression of female life in a society that was in the early days of social mobility, which saw the increased contact between the developing middle class and the waning aristocracy. Additionally, the Wife’s “Prologue” and “Tale” both draw on thematic elements which were prevalent in the contemporaneously popular genre of conduct literature. These texts, which were separated by gender, were predominantly aimed at the newly formed bourgeois to guide their behavior as they operated in unfamiliar social settings. “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” can be read almost as a parody of female conduct literature because she gladly violates almost every established principle recommended to women by the genre. She is later physically beaten with a book of conduct literature because of her bad behavior. This episode of domestic abuse results in physical disability. She explains “That of the strook myn ere wax al deaf” (636). The Knight in her “Tale” is punished for his violence against women. He ultimately learns a redemptive and didactic lesson from the Loathly Lady.

While the Wife of Bath is famous for flouting acceptable female behavior, her Loathly Lady tale contains a moralizing message about good behavior. The Wife of Bath appropriates

⁷ J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2015), 1-3.

romantic rhetoric and Arthurian framework to create her own “Tale” as a didactic critique that shows the positive possible results of treating an older female member of a lower class with respect, as well as giving wives some level of sovereignty over their own lives. As in both the “Tale of Florent” and “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” the Loathly Lady serves as a didactic avatar for the inappropriate lover. The Wife of Bath has lost control of her hearing as the result of domestic abuse, and her body changes with age. While this impairment did not occur naturally, hearing loss is often associated with old age, like Gower’s blindness.

The emphasis on the Wife’s physical body contributes to another unique contribution in the Loathly Lady tradition. Unlike the princess turned Loathly Lady in the “Tale of Florent” or Dame Ragnelle, the Wife of Bath’s Loathly Lady is not subject to a spell. She is uniquely in control over her own body, and therefore her own destiny. This is like the self-fashioning practiced by the Wife in her “Prologue.” The Loathly Lady’s physical appearance is related to the didactic nature of her question and ethical response of the Knight. The Wife of Bath has given her Loathly Lady the bodily agency that she does not have in her own life. Tory Vandeventer Pearman’s work establishes that as a woman, she is defined by sex, body, and social class.⁸ The Wife of Bath appears comical because of her enjoyment of sex, wealth, and travel, all of which are not supposed to be enjoyed by women. She faces spousal abuse and physical disability as punishment for defying the standards of behavior set down by the male authors of female conduct literature. Chaucer uses a Loathly Lady tale to undermine those societal limitations and the didactic literature that reinforces those structures in a more applicable and humane way. The

⁸ Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-4.

Wife of Bath not only embodies the transformation of her age but also the changing attitudes towards domestic violence.

I: How the Good Wife Taught: “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” as Parody

Although she has gained far more social and economic prominence than most women could over the course of her life, the Wife of Bath speaks at length in her “Prologue” about the effects of time and decay, signifying that she is no longer a beautiful young woman. Like Amans/Gower, she is middle-aged at the time of the pilgrimage, but she has recently had an unsuccessful marriage to a much younger spouse. This is yet another parallel between the disabled narrative voices of the Wife and Gower. Both play the role of the inappropriate lover. Gower’s path and progression to another valuable stage in his life is not possible for a woman. Building on the previous chapter in this thesis, aging is an advantage for him, but a disadvantage for the Wife of Bath. This is due in part to the lack of access to books and wider education for most women aside from conduct literature, as well as the negative discussion of women in male conduct literature. To this effect, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue contains parodic elements of female conduct literature, while her “Tale” evokes male conduct literature. By viewing the Loathly Lady as her avatar, a deliberate and direct connection can be seen between the Wife of Bath’s “Prologue” and her “Tale.”

To understand Chaucer’s interpretation of the Loathly Lady motif, it is necessary to understand the Wife of Bath on her own terms as well as a disabled narrative voice. It is also important to understand the definition of the Middle English word “wyf” which is used to describe both the Wife of Bath and her Loathly Lady. The Middle English Dictionary gives multiple definitions for the word including a human biological female regardless of marital

status, a mother, a mistress of a household, or a woman who owns property.⁹ The dictionary qualifies this term as having derogatory connotations: an elderly woman, a sexually active woman, abnormal menstruation, a female peasant, a barmaid, etc.¹⁰ Lorraine Kockanske Stock points out that these words are fairly neutral until qualified with an adjective, such as “olde,” “which may denote a disparaging term for an elderly woman.”¹¹ She goes on to explain that this is different from the Middle English “hagge” which would specifically denote an ugly old woman or witch.¹² This lack of maliciousness in the description of the Loathly Lady is not only unique in the context of the literary trope; it creates a link between the Wife of Bath as a narrator and her avatar, the Loathly Lady. It also casts both within the realm of fictional “wyfs” who populate conduct literature. As Chaucer gives great detail into the Wife of Bath’s social transgressions, in which she seemingly relishes rather than repents, the Wife of Bath emerges as a parody of the wives in female conduct literature.

“The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and “Tale” reflect her experience as a woman in a time of unprecedented social mobility. Her behavior, her talents, and her marriages have allowed her to transverse different stages of social hierarchy. While she is loosely based on the corruptive figure of La Vielle, the old woman in *Le Roman de la Rose*, her behavior allows her to progress in a positive upward direction both financially and socially.¹³ The tale that she tells is elegant, didactic, and not what the reader would expect from her. She transcends the gendered boundaries

⁹ MED, s.v. “wif” 1.a.

¹⁰ MED, s.v. “wif” 1.b.

“Wif n.2,” Wif - Middle English Compendium, accessed October 26, 2023, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED52688/track?counter=2&search_id=40043520.

¹¹ Lorraine Kochanske Stock, “Just How Loathly Is the ‘Wyf’?”: Deconstructing Chaucer’s ‘Hag’ in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” in *Magistra Doctissima: Essays in Honor of Bonnie Wheeler* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 34-42, 35.

¹² Stock, “Wyf,” 35.

¹³ Marion Turner, *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 23.

of conduct literature by transgressing the established submissive behavioral norms of female conduct literature in her “Prologue.” She, as a female narrator, then goes on to tell a tale that is typical of male conduct literature containing lessons on socially noble male behavior. However, like La Vielle, the Good Wif, or other women in conduct literature, the Wife of Bath is a fictional character voicing a male author’s interpretation of a lived female experience in a fictional setting. Glen D. Burger writes that Chaucer’s treatment of the Wife of Bath and her body is actually antifeminist as her “performing female sexuality is a compulsion to *maistrie* foregrounds an all too familiar set of clerically authored clichés.”¹⁴ While this may be perceived as antifeminist in a postmodern reading, the specific incorporation of these clichés and their deliberate violation creates an element of parody and humorous tension within the Wife’s “Prologue.”

The inclusion of parodic elements illustrates the inappropriate content, interpretation, and application of conduct literature as restricting and abusive to women while not openly criticizing the genre or masculine authority. Coupled with the Loathly Lady’s *oratio* and the admonishment that all good conduct should come from modeling our behavior on Christ and the Bible, she states:

Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone
Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace;
It was no thyng biquethe us with oure place. (1162-1164)

Based on this, Burger’s antifeminist interpretation gives way to a didactic reading that argues for the more humane treatment of women regardless of social class. Within the “Tale,” it is the

¹⁴ Glenn D. Burger, “Becoming One Flesh, Inhabiting Two Genders: Ugly Feelings and Blocked Emotions in The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” in *Medieval Affect, Feeling, and Emotion*, eds. Glenn D. Burger and Holly A. Crocker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 90–117, 90.

Loathly Lady who is the moral and transformative center of the didactic lesson. The Wife's "Prologue" challenges changing social structures through her lived experiences while her "Tale" challenges the reoccurring ideas of class structure and aristocratic superiority. In both the "Prologue" and the "Tale," someone can advance in society because they are a good person. Notably, in both texts, a woman can socially progress through marriage.

This social progression mirrors Amans/ Gower's transition from one stage to another in the Ages of Man *topos*. The Wife has progressed through life via a series of marriages which have allowed her to gain education, prominence in a profession, extensive travel, and financial success. From the first lines of her "Prologue," the Wife of Bath challenges established social norms and contemporary authority:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage. (1-3)

The key word in this quote is "experience." Female conduct literature, such as the late fourteenth-century *Le Ménagier de Paris*, was written from an older voice of authority to an adolescent girl of the bourgeois class to guide her in acceptable behavior so that she will be a good member of society, namely a wife. *Le Ménagier de Paris* was not limited to moral exempla in poetry and prose, but also contained practical instructions for running a household including but not limited to hundreds of recipes, gardening advice, party planning, how to select servants, and a guide to training falcons. Incidentally, it was written by her husband.¹⁵ Gina L. Greco explains that "this Parisian man of means and status feels that owing to his wife's youth, she may require such instruction on womanly

¹⁵ Gina L. Greco, "Introduction," in *The Good Wife's Guide: Le Ménagier De Paris: A Medieval Household Book*, eds. Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1.

conduct and household responsibilities as she begins her married life with him.”¹⁶ This book is unique in its comprehensive material, but all medieval conduct books would have contained similar material relevant to their social situation.¹⁷ The book was compiled in 1392-1394, but Greco points out that it is considered a *literary* creation: “The text [which was] assembled from many sources depicts the husband-narrator taking upon himself the duty to educate his new bride about how to be a good and proper wife.”¹⁸ He desires the salvation of her soul and, above all else, his own happiness. Interestingly, he seeks praise from her next husband for having taught her so well.¹⁹ At first glance, the above reads as guidelines or advice from a benevolent older figure. This is not the case with all conduct literature, such as the “Book of Wikked Wyves.” This book, which contained various anti-female texts from famous classical authorities, was used by the young clerk Jankyn to abuse the Wife of Bath both psychologically and physically.

The Wife of Bath is a literary figure herself. In her “Prologue,” Greco points out that she challenges the guidelines and restrictions set down in conduct literature with “such affective intensity that it seems she must indeed be communicating the embodied truth of a woman’s lived experience.”²⁰ As Burger points out, the Wife’s defense of her sexuality and self-hood is performative.²¹ She is no more a real person than the aged husband-narrator of *Le Ménagier de Paris*. Burger reads her “Prologue” as an anti-conduct book and a direct response to anti-feminist authority.²² Instead, it is possible to

¹⁶ Greco, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ Burger, “Flesh,” 90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²² *Ibid.*, 90-91.

read the “Prologue” as a parody of female conduct literature by which Chaucer offers a critique of the negative effects of the genre, especially domestic violence against women. Through her multiple marriages, the Wife of Bath has gained the practical experience that would make her more of an expert in the art of marriage than the clerks who traditionally wrote female conduct literature. It may be expected that as a nominal Wife, she would take this chance to divulge secret information as to what would make a husband happy. Instead, she focuses on what would make a wife happy. This is not what the reader would initially expect from the raunchy Wife of Bath. As Turner points out, she is a descendent from the pestiferous La Vieille in *La Roman de la Rose*.²³ As such, Chaucer could have used her to give instructions to women on how to trick men.

Equally, Chaucer could have had the Wife of Bath use her “Tale” to instruct women on how to be better wives. In her “Prologue,” the Wife of Bath tells us that her first marriage was at the age of twelve (4). This tender age marks the Wife of Bath as an inappropriate lover for the first time. It is one of the extreme youngest ages that a girl would have been permitted to marry. Although her family of origin is at the lower end of the growing middle class, her first marriage is reminiscent of the practice of nobility, who would betroth and marry their daughters at exceptionally young ages to much older men for political and financial gain. Over the course of her three good and two bad marriages (196), she grows and develops from a young girl into a wealthy, well-traveled middle-aged woman. This is the opposite of the submissive domestic behavior detailed in female conduct literature. Through her travels and her amassed wealth, the Wife of Bath has

²³ Turner, *Wife*, 23.

obtained an unusual level of sovereignty for a woman. Her expression of personal sovereignty gives greater significance to the moral of her Loathly Lady tale.

The Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and "Tale" show the evolution of the nature of sovereignty within the Loathly Lady tradition. Chaucer's focus is not political, but personal. In the first chapter of this thesis, it was evident that the Irish source material focused on men and male political sovereignty. In her chapter, Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley points out that "scholars are uncertain about the depth of Chaucer's familiarity with the Celtic tradition of mythic tales in which the Sovereignty of the Land, personified as female, confers kingship upon a worthy man through sexual coupling."²⁴ While she sees the incorporation of the Loathly Lady motif as a "wishful vision of a movement toward a more egalitarian society,"²⁵ the Wife of Bath's "Tale" is a far more subtle and conservative reaction to the contemporary environment as well as a response to Gower. In both the "Tale of Florent" and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" an old woman is now the ethical center of the text. By using the Wife of Bath as a narrator, Chaucer has allotted space for a middle-aged, socially mobile, disabled woman's perspective. Like Gower, the blind poet, she also has a physical impairment that is associated with old age. The Wife is "somedel deaf," (446) but her hearing loss is not the result of advancing age. Her impairment is caused by domestic abuse at the hands of her most recent and youngest husband, who was enraged that she would not conform to the behavioral standards set down by the conduct literature that he was reading at the time of the incident. This is ironic as a hearing impairment makes her unable to

²⁴ Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty through the Lady: The 'Wife of Bath's Tale' and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia." in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, eds. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 73-82, 73.

²⁵ Biebel-Stanley, "Sovereignty," 73.

“listen to” or obey her husband. In body and behavior, she goes against the masculine authority that would guide or regulate her.

The use of parody offers a palatable critique of clerical and masculine authority, which paves the way for the wider-reaching didactic message of her Loathly Lady Tale. Burger goes on to argue that the Wife of Bath’s life story is “similar to the exemplary stories of bad women found in contemporary conduct texts.”²⁶ While her behavior does not conform to the docile subordination dictated in *Le Ménagier de Paris* or “How the Good Wijf Taughte Hir Doughter,” Turner points out in her recent book that the actual behavior of the Wife of Bath is in no way “wicked.” It is tempting to read the Wife of Bath in this way due to her perceived sexual appetite “welcome the sixte!” (45). Conversely, Turner points out that while the Wife of Bath does not go on her various pilgrimages for “solely a devotional exercise, it is not a sexual adventure either.”²⁷ There is no indication that the Wife of Bath had been unfaithful to her husbands or behaved in a lecherous manner.²⁸ She details her recreational activities (555-558) as being religious social events. While she may be seen as an inappropriate pilgrim, she does not behave inappropriately while on pilgrimage. Burger views the dissonance between her “Prologue” and her “Tale” as indicative of the “unstable relationship with conduct literature for women and the social innovation this makes possible.”²⁹ As with the “Tale of Florent,” this Loathly Lady tale is a conservative and stabilizing narrative. While Burger argues that the Wife’s economic and sexually satisfying yet controversial life experiences “foreground all too familiar set of clerically authored clichés,” this was not done with the intention of casting the Wife of Bath as a “wicked”

²⁶ Burger, “Flesh,” 91.

²⁷ Turner, *Wife*, 120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹ Burger, “Flesh,” 91.

woman like La Vielle in *Le Roman de la Rose*.³⁰ Instead, her behavior and her interpretations of contemporary literary authority gently poke fun at the ridiculousness and unattainable standards set down in female conduct literature.

“The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” contains multiple quotations from contemporarily recognizable authoritative texts and conduct literature, such as Aesop’s Fables. To increase the parodic atmosphere of the “Prologue,” Chaucer includes deliberate misquotations that were still recognizable to the reader. This echoes the contemporary perspective of medieval ecclesiastical authorities who, as Turner writes, “suggested that there was an inherent antipathy between women and books, characterizing women as frivolous, stupid, bodily, and domestic, in contrast to serious, intelligent, cerebral, and intellectual books.”³¹ Turner goes on to reference Richard de Bury’s *Philobiblon* [The Love of Books] (c. 1345) as an example of the clerical interpretation of the relationship between women and books. The text claims that women wanted to attack books and trade them for fabric, as they see books as superfluous.³² This contributes to the element of parody in the “Prologue.” Not only does the Wife assume a nominally masculine role as a successful textile merchant, but she also has a broad working knowledge of contemporary and classical literary authorities. She was also physically attacked and suffered a permanent impairment because of a book: “That I was beten for a book, pardee!” (712). The book in question contained multiple biblical and classical anti-women authorities in such an extreme amount that it too may be a parodic element.

³⁰ Turner, *Wife*, 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³² *Ibid.*, 89.

The *Philobiblon* is an example of a contemporary text that uses classical authorities such as Theophrastus and Valerius to dehumanize women, reducing them to “bi-ped beasts.”³³ Turner argues that “it is books’ uniform anti-woman bias that is the real problem— not the alleged unintellectual bias of women.”³⁴ A further element of parody can be seen in the choice of fable that the Wife famously references. A twelfth century female author, Marie de France, wrote a version of the “man and lion” tale which includes a reference in line 692 “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?” Her interpretation of the fable focuses not on sexism, but rather on class issues of nobility and *gentillesse*. Marie de France also cautions against the authority of art and fables, calling them “mencuinge” [lies] and “sunge” [illusions]. Turner writes that “like Avianus [in the original fable] she focuses on the unreliability of art, undercutting its authority, but she also reminds us that the creation of art is dependent on power of various kinds.”³⁵ The element of parody is intensified not only by the Wife’s telling of a very artful and deliberately didactic Arthurian romance, but also because the Wife’s hearing impairment is the result of domestic violence over a book. Chaucer’s decision to include this experience of domestic violence not only highlights the symbiotic relationship between life and literature, but it also echoes Georges Duby’s perspective that “human beings do not orient their behavior towards real events and circumstances, but rather to the image of them.”³⁶ The reference to the famous fable is a reminder for the reader to be aware of the motivation and the backgrounds of those writing conduct literature.

³³ Richard de Bury, “The Complaint of Books against the Clergy Already Promoted” in *The Love of Books; the Philobiblon of Richard De Bury*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (London: Kegan Paul, 1888). Cited by Turner, *Wife*, 89.

³⁴ Turner, *Wife*, 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁶ Georges Duby, ‘Histoire social et idéologie des sociétés’, Goff, Jacques Le, and Pierre Nora, eds. *Faire De L’histoire*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 147-168, 148. Cited by Turner, *Wife*, 15.

The reference comes directly after *The Wife of Bath's* discussion of the hatred that clerks nurture for women and wives. The book that her young husband Jankyn was reading at the time, the 'book of wikked wyves' (685), was referred to by him as his "Valerie and Theofraste," two of the authorities praised by the *Philobiblon*. The incident of domestic violence in her Prologue presents a direct link between the concepts written about women and the lived, physical consequences that women suffered under their authority. Jankyn, her fifth and youngest husband, struck her with such force that it deafened her (634-636) because she ripped a page out of the book. The Wife explains that this behavior occurred only after their wedding. In an inversion of the transformation of the Loathly Lady that occurs after her marriage in her "Tale," Jankyn transforms from the "joly clerk, [...] that was so hende" (628) to a horrible representation of clerks who wrote conduct literature that condemned women. He gave the Wife of Bath no agency ("He nolde suffre nothyng of my list" (634)) and became physically violent. As she was older and more financially secure than Jankyn, she wanted to keep a level of independence after their marriage. He resented this. He used classical and biblical authorities to lecture her about her role as a wife (637-665). He luxuriated in the oppressive contents of the book, which included Jerome, Tertullian, and Theophrastus (666-681) and laughed as he read it whenever he had "leisure" (669, 670, 672, 683). While the Wife of Bath may have asked "who painted the lion?" (692) to remind the reader that art is biased, in this instance the art is also ironic. Jankyn was a clerk, the profession not only responsible for writing conduct literature, but also writing terrible things about women (707-710). Every night, he would read hostile and offensive stories about women aloud to her (711-785). Finally, she reached a breaking point. Unable to bear it any longer, she got up and ripped three pages out of the book and struck her husband so hard that he fell backwards and into the fireplace (788-793). He then jumped up and hit her so hard that she

fell to the floor as if she was dead. She suffered permanent hearing loss as a result of this incident (794-796). Through the inclusion of the parodic elements and given that this is the Wife of Bath's narration, the Wife has become a sympathetic character despite her perceived transgressions. This episode deliberately creates a negative response to Jankyn, his behavior, and the misuse of conduct literature to control the Wife.

Chaucer seems to have been inspired by the stereotypes that these authorities raged against, but he gives the Wife a voice that allows her to realistically argue against these restrictive authorities. After listening to an abusive speech for seventy lines, she asks "Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose/ the wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?" (786-787). This is the "woe in marriage" referenced in the first lines of her "Prologue." Not only does she invite critique of these contemporary and classical authorities, but she also combines the textual theory with the dangers of lived practice, stating "I was beten for a book" (712). Turner points out that just as these texts railed against comparatively normal behaviors of women, so too did real women have to suffer physical violence and domestic abuse because of their fictional rhetoric.³⁷ Multiple scholars such as Pearman and Carruthers have analyzed the Wife of Bath's behavior against conduct literature such as the *Book of the Knight*.³⁸ Diane Bornstein suggests that Chaucer may have been drawing directly from female conduct literature, specifically *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*, when creating the dress and behavior of the Wife in the *Prologue*.³⁹ She goes on to explain that *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage* is "similar in content, form, and setting to *How The Good Wjife Taughte Hir Doughter*, which suggests that the author may have

³⁷ Turner, *Wife*, 18.

³⁸ Chevalier Geoffrey de la Tour Landry, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, trans. William Caxton, ed. M.Y. Offord (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

³⁹ Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women*. (Hamden: Shoe String, 1983), 66-67.

known the latter work.”⁴⁰ Of the transgressions that the Wife of Bath commits, Bornstein spots a specific reference that Chaucer makes to the *Pylgremage*; the reference to “fyr” and “tow” (89) is a proverb that the mother shares with her daughter before she leaves home for a pilgrimage.⁴¹ The Wife of Bath uses this phrase in reference to sexual attraction.

The Wife of Bath herself transcends and transgresses both the moral and physical spaces designated for women within conduct literature. Firstly, her extensive travels via pilgrimages remove her from the sessile domestic sphere. Secondly, as Pearman explains, she “deviates from the virtues of modesty, chastity, silence, that conduct manuals prescribe for women in her ostentatious dress, overt sexuality, outspokenness, and love of wine.”⁴² The Wife enjoys sex, gossip, and a good drink— all of which are behaviors that these texts condemn. Yet it is her humorous acknowledgement of these flaws which endear her to the reader, furthering the parodic element. The Wife is likable because she violates these standards, and she enjoys doing so.

These standards of behavior are laid out in conduct literature to regulate the bodies and behavior of women and restrict them to the domestic sphere. Bornstein writes that “the ideals set forth in the courtesy books reflect the subordination that existed in life.”⁴³ The Wife of Bath offers an equal and opposite figure to the young wife in *Le Ménagier de Paris*. This text offers factual requirements for sober self-restraint and the running of a large household. The way that she walks, talks, dresses, socializes, and manages her daily existence is restricted to the home and subjected to the preference of her aged husband, which Bornstein asserts is an accurate

⁴⁰ Bornstein, *Lady*, 66-67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴² Pearman, *Women*, 60.

⁴³ Bornstein, *Lady*, 119.

portrayal of a wife's expected behavior during the medieval period.⁴⁴ At the time of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath is not married. Jankyn has died and she is actively looking for his replacement. This not only increases the comedic value of her behavior, but it also creates a link to the *Confessio Amantis*. Due to her advanced age and violation of established expectations of a widow, the Wife of Bath would be an inappropriate lover like Amans.

While the previous chapter proposes that Gower used the "Tale of Florent" to caution against post-youthful love, the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and her "Tale" encourage it. One of the ways that the Wife of Bath confronts these societal expectations of female aging is through the description of her avatar, the Loathly Lady. In the other Loathly Lady tales, significant textual attention is given to the grotesque deformities of the Loathly Lady. The "Tale of Florent" contains a seventeen-line description of her deformed body (280-296). *Ragnelle* has a similarly long description of eighteen lines (228-254). Both descriptions serve to dehumanize the Loathly Lady and repulse the reader. The body of the Loathly Lady in the Wife of Bath's tale is given a quick and comparatively vague description (999-1000). The primary difference between the descriptions, as Turner points out, is that "the aging female body is not held up for ridicule and contempt."⁴⁵ Like the Wife of Bath, her body does not fit into the standard of a medieval romantic heroine or wife.

The Wife of Bath's behavior and attitude towards sexuality as well as her non-idealized aged body classify her as an inappropriate lover. She is too old, no longer beautiful, and not virginal like the typical heroines of medieval romance. She is aware of this but does not let it inhibit her sexuality. She states early in her "Prologue" that she is looking for her next husband

⁴⁴ Bornstein, *Lady*, 68.

⁴⁵ Turner, *Wife*, 44.

(45). Later, she acknowledges that her beauty has been taken by age (475), but she is unwilling to stop enjoying herself “yet to be right myrie wol I fonde” (479). This extends to her version of the Loathly Lady. Unlike all the other tales in the tradition, the Wife of Bath does not dwell on the description of the Loathly Lady. Each of the other tales delight in the horror of female decay and the loss of beauty; they go into detail about the physical deformities and impairments that encompass the figure’s loathliness. In “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” she is simply called “a fouler wight ther may no man devyse” (999). This reads as sympathetic treatment of the Loathly Lady’s physical appearance and is potentially indicative of empathy or self-identification from the Wife of Bath, which further solidifies the link between the “Prologue” and “Tale.” Another link between the two texts is the concept of the inappropriate lover, who suffers from physical impairments associated with aging. The Loathly Lady as an inappropriate lover is a link and a response to Gower’s earlier version of the Tale.

While the “Tale of Florent” is accepted by scholars to be directly connected with the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” the structure and relationship between The Wife of Bath’s “Prologue” and her “Tale” are remarkably like the culturally significant English poems “How the Good Wijf Taughte Hir Doughtir” and “How the Wise Mann Taught His Sonne.” The “Good Wijf” survives in five manuscripts ranging from the 1350s to circa 1500.⁴⁶ This means that the poem’s popularity not only pre-dates *The Canterbury Tales*, but it was contemporaneously and continuously relevant to the growing English middle class. Both poems consist of older authoritative figures giving advice to younger family members in an intimate domestic setting. Sponsler posits that these poems herald the germination of internalized personal manners as

⁴⁶ Claire Sponsler, “The English ‘How the Good Wiff Taughte Hir Doughtir’ and ‘How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne.’” in *Medieval Conduct Literature: An Anthology of Vernacular Guides to Behavior for Youths, with English Translations*, ed. Mark D. Johnston, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 285–303, 285.

“public behavior increasingly became the responsibility of the individual.”⁴⁷ Like the Wife of Bath’s “Prologue” and “Tale”, Sponsler sees that both poems respond to the increasing social mobility, as “definitions of gentility and nobility came to be based on personal attributes as much as on birth or wealth alone.”⁴⁸ Although “The Wise Mann” does not evoke Arthurian romance, the good sense and logical advice given echoes the *oratio* given by Chaucer’s Loathly Lady.

Although the earliest date given for “The Wise Mann” is not contemporaneous to *The Canterbury Tales*, with the earliest date being in the 1430s, it is possible that the text may have an earlier date of origin. This is due to the popularity of its sister text, “The Good Wijf,” and their vast array of similarities. Sponsler confirms that the poems are often considered to be a linked pair and were often transcribed in the same manuscript, such as Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 and Lambeth Palace Library MS 853. She goes on to state that the poems not only share similar styles and organization, but they also have a shared implied author and intended audience.⁴⁹ It is impossible to ascertain if the two poems were written by the same historic person or if they were both written by male clerics. However, both narrators assume the role of middle-aged bourgeois parents who offer moral and behavioral instruction to their intimate audience. This is reminiscent of the Wife of Bath, who shares the social status and authority with the Good Wijf, as well as the admittedly universally used but nonetheless noteworthy parallel of both being addressed as “The Wife” within the context of these literary works’ titles. Due to the popularity of “The Good Wijf” and its origins dating to Chaucer’s own bourgeois youth, it is

⁴⁷ Sponsler, “English,” 286.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

quite possible that he is creating a deliberate reference to the conduct literature which would have contributed to the Wife of Bath's "shock value."

The similarities between "The Good Wif" and the Wife of Bath's prologue extend to organization and subject matter. The Prologue opens with lines explaining the superiority of experience to "auctoritee," or male conduct literature (1-2). This and the following lines can be read as an equal and opposite response to the opening stanza of "The Good Wif," implying that she rejects the restrictions and advice of the text. The first stanza sets the scene with the titular Good Wif instructing her daughter "A ful good woman to be" (3). Line 6-17 focus on how one should subjugate oneself to God and Church. Comparatively, lines 5-8 in the Wife of Bath's Prologue acknowledge God's authority while commenting on how many times she has been wed "at chirche dore" (6). Striking parallels exist in the two texts. Most notably lines 25-31 of "The Good Wif" detail multiple specific behaviors which the Wife of Bath deliberately and proudly violates within her Prologue. The Good Wif advises: "Whanne thou sittist in the chirche/ thi beedis thou schalt bidde" (25-26). The Wife of Bath spends her time in church during her fourth husband's funeral lusting after Jankin: "After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire/ Of legges and of feet so clene and faire/ That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold." (597-599). The Good Wif advises her daughter to not gossip: "Make thou no iangelynge to freende/ nor to sibbe" (26-27). Similarly, the Wife of Bath gives details of her gossiping habits and how much it shames her husband (533-542). The Good Wif emphasizes the importance of meekness and submissive behavior for the pleasure of the husband (46-52), cautions against leaving the house (67-68), against selling cloth (69). The list of dis-similarities between the two texts is continuous. The Wife of Bath seems to intentionally violate all of the advice provided by the Good Wif, thus

making her a “bad” wife. Her Loathly Lady, however, offers words of similar caution to the Knight.

The Wife of Bath states that men say “Thow seyst we wyves wol oure vices hide” (282) until after they are married. The Loathly Lady does the opposite of this; her physical appearance and impairments are evident from the first encounter. Even after they are married, the Knight admits that this is his primary complaint about her, stating “Thou art so loothly, and so oold also” (1100). The Loathly Lady is willing to forgive this: “So wel ye myghte bere yow unto me” (1108). This statement reflects the authoritative gendered and class-based tensions that exist in both the “Prologue” and the “Tale.” Ben Parson’s article suggests the contrast between male and female “authority” in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue comes from the difference between the age and application of wisdom.⁵⁰ He writes that the Wife of Bath’s young husband “Jankyn not only provides an important focus for pedagogic concerns but develops into a complex interrogation of the larger implications of study.”⁵¹ This same logic can be applied to the Knight in the Wife of Bath’s Tale; he begins as a violent threat to women, much like the young clerk Jankyn who is representative of the violence possible at the hands of the clerks writing conduct literature. The Knight can follow in the footsteps of Perceval and other knights in Arthurian Romance and learn from the advice given to him by an older person. This ultimately transforms the Knight into an ideal and loving husband.

The Wife of Bath is not a moral ideal for a contemporary young woman upon which to base her behavior on, nor is she a cautionary didactic figure. Instead, the Wife of Bath is an

⁵⁰ Ben Parsons, “Beaten For A Book: Domestic and Pedagogic Violence in The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37, no. 1 (2015), 163.

⁵¹ Parsons, “Beaten,” 163.

example of the positives and negatives experienced by women as they gained newfound social mobility within the growing bourgeois class. She also exposes the dangers associated with a very popular genre which regulated women's bodies and the way that they existed in the changing world around them.

II: The Loathly Lady: Transforming Behavior in The Wife of Bath's Tale

Chaucer's version of the Loathly Lady Tale has multiple similarities and differences to the other versions of the tale, or as Stock qualifies it the "Irish Sovereignty Tale Type."⁵² When compared to Gower's "Tale of Florent," *The Weddyng of Syr Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, or *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, the plot of the tale contains increased focus on the didactic instruction of the Knight and the moralizing powers of the Loathly Lady figure. The amount of criticism surrounding "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" is immense. Yet, it is unique within scholarship to see that "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" evokes a version of male conduct literature, namely the didactic lessons presented to a young knight by an older and wiser individual within a traditional romance setting. Krueger specifically categorizes Arthurian romance as "an apparently unlikely source" of conduct literature.⁵³ She explains that the pedagogic encounters with older characters "reveal much about the trajectory of medieval didactic texts."⁵⁴ While the Arthurian romances do not follow the format of female conduct literature, which instructs women on how to behave in daily situations, the fantastic elements of the romance genre still contain didactic and moralizing principles that show appropriate behavior and the application of

⁵² Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "The Hag of Castle Hautdesert: The Celtic Sheela-Na-Gig and the Auncian in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries* (Dallas, TX: Scriptorium Press, 2001), 121–48, 34.

⁵³ Krueger, "Introduction," ix.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, x.

gentillese. The “Tale” also contains a parodic element: the Knight behaves inversely to how a knight should, like the Wife of Bath in light of her gendered conduct literature.

Just as parodic and stylistic elements link the “Prologue” to female conduct literature, parodic and stylistic elements link the “Tale” to male conduct literature. There are two obvious parodic elements in her “Tale.” The first is that as the Wife of Bath is seemingly the antithesis of the performative model set down in female conduct literature, so too is the ungallant rapist Knight. Secondly, the “Tale” is in the style of Arthurian romantic male conduct literature, but it is being told by a woman. The Wife directly acknowledges that this is her interpretation of a written text, as she prefaces telling her Tale with “as I rede” and “as I speke” (862-63). The “Tale” contains motifs and didactic messages that are focused on the moral and intellectual instruction of the male reader, rather than the bodily experience of the female variant. Emma Lipton writes in her article that the “Tale” “promotes social change through reeducation,” and it does so through the authority of women.⁵⁵ The “Tale” is analogous to the “Tale of Florent” in the *Confessio Amantis*, which is contemporary to the *Canterbury Tales*. It is also very similar to the fifteenth century *The Weddyng of Syr Gawan and Dame Ragnelle*. The narratives of the three texts focus on a knightly protagonist who is being punished. His punishment is to find the answer to the question “what do all women want?” In each instance, the lifesaving answer is given to him by an ugly old woman on the condition that he marry her. This differs slightly in the *Ragnelle* versions. Ultimately, the handsome young knight and the Loathly Lady are married. In their marriage bed, the Loathly Lady transforms into a beautiful young bride. She asks her

⁵⁵ Emma Lipton, “Contracts, Activist Feminism, and ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 54, no. 3 (2019): 335- 351, 335.

husband if he would prefer her to be lovely during the day or the night. He tells her to choose. This donation of sovereignty causes the Loathly Lady to remain in her lovely form all the time.

“The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” does contain multiple deviations from the other tales. Turner sees one of the key differences to be the moral backgrounds of the knights. She points out that in the *Confessio Amantis*, Florent had committed no crime at all— he had killed someone in battle, in a fair fight. In *Ragnelle*, it is the virtuous Sir Gawain who agrees to marry the Loathly Lady, not King Arthur, the transgressor. In “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” the knight is a criminal; he is a rapist.⁵⁶ While transformation is a key element in all the Loathly Lady tales, the moral transformation of the knight is the didactic focal point which the Wife and Chaucer try to convey. As the Wife of Bath violates the behavioral principles of female conduct literature, her knight has violated the chivalric principles of male conduct literature. Unlike the virtuous Florent or Sir Gawain who is tested by the Loathly Lady, this knight is a villain. In an inversion of the romantic trope, he is not a hero protecting the realm and its more vulnerable subjects, but rather a threat to women and their bodies. While this can be seen as a parody of the romance genre, the inversion is neither exaggerated nor done for comedic effect— it is intentionally didactic. The knight’s punishment, as Turner writes, “is to educate himself about female desire.”⁵⁷ Another difference in the “Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” is that the Loathly Lady is the ethical and didactic center of the tale.

The Loathly Lady lectures the Knight in a lengthy speech on *gentillesse* that is reminiscent of the older authoritative narrator lecturing the young protagonist in conduct literature. This speech focuses on the fact that social status has nothing to do with a person’s

⁵⁶ Turner, *Wife*, 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

value. It is the internal self and reflective behavior that matters. This importance of the inner self is presented in yet another difference between the texts: unlike the two other Loathly Ladies, whose bodies are under enchantments, there is no mention of a spell in “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale.’” The Loathly Lady transforms herself. Based on her argument that an ugly old woman can be a better person than a handsome young knight, it raises the question of “which is her real form?” Her real form is based on her choice, just as the knight and the reader can choose to behave with *gentillesse*.

As with the other versions of the Loathly Lady tale, her body and physical appearance become the great challenge to the knight’s practice of *gentillesse*. In “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” the Loathly Lady is termed the “olde wyf.” Stock points out that “the usually garrulous Wife’s uncharacteristically, and therefore significantly, reticent presentation of her female subject never physically describes “the wyf.””⁵⁸ This does not mean that this Loathly Lady is any less ugly than the others. She is described briefly within the “Tale.” When the Knight first sees her, she is “a fouler wight ther may no man devyse” (999). Theodore Silverstein questions: “How ugly is ugly? How loathsome[is] the Loathly Lady?”⁵⁹ He goes on to qualify that the Wife of Bath is unique in the tradition as she is the only one that does not provide details; Gower gives a lengthy description that is reminiscent of an ugly old peasant woman: “a lothly wommaaysch figure” (1529-1530), riddled with the impairments associated with old age. The *Ragnelle* texts also play upon her grotesque appearance for comedic effect. Even the Old Woman in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is described as some sort of disgusting oddity in contrast to the beautiful Lady Bertilak. As Stock points out, Chaucer is capable of great grotesque descriptions, such as those of

⁵⁸ Stock, “Wyf,” 35.

⁵⁹ Theodore Silverstein, “The Wife of Bath and The Rhetoric of Enchantment; or, How To Make A Hero See In The Dark.” *Modern Philology* 58, no. 3 (1961): 153–73, 166.

the Miller and the Summoner in the “General Prologue.”⁶⁰ Silverstein writes that this subtlety would have had great resonance with the pilgrims, and therefore many other contemporary readers as well.⁶¹ In light of this, it is the subtleness of the Loathly Lady’s description which allows greater impact for her didactic message.

Once the Knight has learned the didactic message and changed internally, the Loathly Lady’s physical transformation takes place as a reward. The positive benefits of transition, transformation, and change in boundaries are central to the didactic function of the “Tale.” Stock posits that “the most demonstrable transformation in Chaucer’s character has not been from ‘hag’ to beautiful bride but rather from ‘wyf’ to ‘hag.’”⁶² This may be an applicable statement in terms of critical perception of the Wife of Bath’s Loathly Lady, but not the most remarkable transformation in the “Tale.” In this quote, Stock touches upon the presence of social transformation. The recent development of social mobility, which is one of the driving forces behind the development of conduct literature as a popular genre, creates yet another link between “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and “Tale.” The Loathly Lady’s speech is one of the elements in the “Tale” that challenges established ideas of class boundaries and aristocratic superiority. The Wife of Bath uses the Loathly Lady as a mouthpiece to explain her own experience traversing classes as she rose from a small girl married to an old man, learned a trade, and became financially and socially more successful with each marriage.

As much as women can socially progress through marriage, the Loathly Lady argues that anyone can progress if they are a good person. This didactic message is successfully conveyed in

⁶⁰ Stock, “Wyf,” 37.

⁶¹ Silverstein, “Rhetoric,” 170.

⁶² Stock, “Wyf,” 39.

part due to the use of the romance genre as a temporal separation from the reader's reality into what Carolyn Dinshaw terms "a communal present."⁶³ She explains that "when we do perceive change, we do sense time."⁶⁴ By setting the "Tale" in a vague Arthurian time, the "Tale" takes on the quality of a fairy tale or legend, which allows for any contemporary critiques and transgressions to be explored in a comparatively safe space. This is particularly evident in the speech that the Loathly Lady gives to admonish the Knight. By setting the "Tale" within the confines of male conduct literature, she critiques the very genre that has rendered her disabled:

Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;
And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour
And clepe hym fader, for youre gentillesse (III. 1207-1211)

The Wife of Bath uses her avatar, the Loathly Lady, to question the authority of conduct literature. Although the Wife of Bath via the Loathly Lady has outlined these critiques for rhetorical purposes, it is important to note that they do not fully correspond to the Knight's complaints. As Eckhart points out, she first addresses her social position, possibly as it was a specific objection from the Knight (III. 1100-1101).⁶⁵ She condenses her physical appearance and age into one line, "foul and old" (III. 1213), in the third section. The second section, which addresses her poverty, does not respond to any of the Knight's complaints. The Knight does not accuse the Loathly Lady of wanting his money, as she refused it when they were offered to her in lieu of his hand in marriage (III. 1061).⁶⁶ Although the Loathly Lady does refer to herself as

⁶³ Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, N.C., 2012), 3.

⁶⁴ Dinshaw, *Time*, 8.

⁶⁵ K. Eckhart, "Chaucer's Boece and Rhetorical Process in the Wife of Bath's Bedside Questio," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 33, no. 4 (Autumn 2015): 377-92, 377.

⁶⁶ Eckhart, "Boece," 378.

“foul, oold, and poore,” (III. 1063) which is indicative of her social rank, the Knight’s critique of her does not refer to her financial situation, but to her low social rank.⁶⁷ The Wife of Bath uses the Loathly Lady to address the growing tension between wealth and class during the fourteenth century. Through her series of marriages, the Wife of Bath has had extensive practical experience with the germinating concept of social mobility.

The Wife of Bath’s feeling of insecurity due to her “inferior” social rank may have sparked the Loathly Lady’s thirty-line objection to an accusation that was never openly made, as suggested by Eckhart.⁶⁸ It is possible that this *oratio* or “Bedside Questio,” as termed by Eckhart, explains that the didactic instruction is the reason for the Wife of Bath telling a Loathly Lady tale. The Loathly Lady is speaking to both the Knight and the wider inclusive audience of the *Canterbury Tales*. Her moralizing instruction is not directed to any class or gender. The practical nature of her advice – how one should treat those who are less fortunate than oneself – emulates the thematic content and structure of contemporarily popular male conduct literature. Through her parodic gendered performance of wifhood and the telling of a refined didactic tale, Chaucer presents the idea that there is one set of advice that should be given to men, another to women, while emphasizing shared common moral standards of behavior. The blending of male and female elements of conduct literature in this instruction on how to be a good person makes the Loathly Lady’s advice applicable to all readers. “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” emphasizes common moral standards that should be applied to both men and women, rather than separating the requirements for what makes a good person based on their age, gender, or social class.

⁶⁷ Eckart, “Boece,” 378.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 378.

The physical violence against women which is present in both the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and "Tale" is the catalyst for this revision of moral standards. Male conduct literature encourages violence against women, which is the knight's crime in "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" The purpose of conduct literature was not only to establish a pattern of acceptable behavior in a social setting, but these texts also provide a guide to avoid the consequences of not following these rules. Sarah E. Newton explains that "their tone may be both admonitory and hortatory, instructing readers both on how to behave and how not to behave."⁶⁹ The Loathly Lady's speech echoes this admonitory tone. Additionally, the knight faces a physical punishment for his crime—if he cannot find the answer to "what all women want," he will be executed. This death sentence is, based on Lipton's argument, an exaggerated "collusion of ideology and power."⁷⁰ In the medieval period, these consequences were not limited to ostracization or possible financial recriminations. Physical violence and torture were accepted standard punishments that were administered by figures of authority. Marilyn Desmond explains that marital and domestic violence were quotidian during the medieval period, as can be seen in the surviving examples of legal texts and conduct literature.⁷¹ While conduct literature traditionally normalized physical violence as a punishment for women, the "Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" presents violence against women as a crime. However, the knight can be educated and reformed. He learns from the Loathly Lady, internalizes her message, and is ultimately redeemed.

The Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady tale makes recognizable use of some of the earliest tropes of male conduct literature. The Arthurian romance *Le Conte du Graal*, written in the

⁶⁹ Sarah E. Newton, *Learning to Behave: A Guide To American Conduct Books Before 1900* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 4.

⁷⁰ Lipton, "Contracts," 339.

⁷¹ Marilynn Desmond, *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath the Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 13.

1180s by Chrétien de Troyes, and Robert de Blois's mid-thirteenth century *Beaudous* both contain scenes where young men who wish to be good knights receive instruction from their mothers before setting off for Camelot.⁷² The Loathly Lady's advocacy for cross-class social mobility recalls Chrétien's last Arthurian romance, *Perceval*. Perceval, a young country boy, encounters a group of knights and decides that he wants to join their ranks and seek chivalric honor. Before the naive adolescent leaves home, his mother offers counsel on religious and social behavior, particularly how to respectfully interact with women. He then leaves without saying goodbye to his mother and proceeds to misapply her advice. After some time passes, he receives instruction in the practice of chivalry from an older man, Gornemant de Goort (1275-1660). Still later, he meets his uncle, who is a religious hermit. From him, he receives instruction on spiritual matters (6268-6433). While Krueger sees that "within the course of the romance, three adults impart principles of courtly, chivalric, and religious conduct to the young knight, each time in the form of discourse integrated into the story."⁷³ This series of separate topics of instruction at different points in the narrative corresponds to the differing priorities, behaviors, and expectations of the Ages of Man *topos*. Perceval begins his life's journey as a maladroit courtly lover. As he matures, he focuses on chivalry, and finally religious matters with sometimes comedic consequences.

While the didactic messages were incorporated into the dialogue of the text, Robert de Blois included lengthy separate instruction in *Beaudous*, which was inspired by the works of Chrétien de Troyes.⁷⁴ By writing as a mother giving invaluable advice, Robert de Blois wrote texts that were not only considered invaluable to the instruction of aristocratic youths, but they

⁷² Krueger, "Introduction," x.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, x.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, x.

were also separated by gender. The *Enseignement des Princes* [The Instruction of Princes] was addressed to young men, while the *Chastoiement des Dames* [The Chastisement or Punishment of Ladies] focused on the behavior of women. While these texts exist within the same courtly sphere, they differ in topic and tone. They offer a primary example of the similarities and differences to be expected in gendered conduct literature. As Kreuger succinctly points out “the book for ladies includes discussion of dress, appearance, and etiquette that is absent in the work for knights, which enumerates the moral values of chivalry.”⁷⁵ The fact that the Wife of Bath allows her Loathly Lady to haranguing the Knight with principles of behavioral conduct more likely to be found in female conduct literature is not surprising. Kreuger points out that these texts were intended for a mixed gender audience and invited comparative analysis.⁷⁶ She also points out that the accessibility of the genre allowed for the common inclusion of conduct literature in popular compilations that included courtly lyrics or devotional material. For the *Canterbury Tales*, she gives only the example of Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale” as an example of Chaucer’s interpretation of conduct literature. Griselda is, as Kreuger writes, “one of the most widely disseminated exempla of wifely conduct in medieval literature.”⁷⁷ Still, it is evident that there is another example of conduct literature in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Based on this assessment, the Wife of Bath provides a foil to the idealized Griselda, who is the model for perfect wifely behavior. The Wife emerges as a real-life example of experiential wifhood in the medieval period and the negative effects that stem from conduct literature. The parodic elements of her “Prologue” show that it is not possible for a real woman to be held to such standards and that the subsequent punishment for not being able to obtain this ideal is

⁷⁵ Kreuger, “Introduction,” xi.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

ridiculous. Having critiqued the flaws of female conduct literature, the progression to a Loathly Lady tale that incorporates recognizable tropes, and an applicable corresponding didactic message is logical. As her textual avatar, the Loathly Lady's physical ugliness corresponds to the Wife of Bath's perceived social ugliness or ugly manners. Glenn A. Steinberg writes that: "Chaucer's choice to invite this character type on the Canterbury pilgrimage raises associated themes of class and draws attention to both the ugliness and the potential beauty of the *parvenus* among the Canterbury pilgrims."⁷⁸ He goes on to argue that Chaucer suggests that the members of the *nouveau riche* cannot be magically transformed into upstanding members of society because their "ugliness" cannot be changed.⁷⁹ This interpretation of ugliness stems from a classist perception, which the Loathly Lady addresses in her *oratio*.

Due to increased social mobility, people outside of the nobility now have access to goods and status that were previously reserved for the aristocracy, who do not want to accept the members of the lower class in their social and physical spaces. Their bias is purportedly based on poor behavior and non-understanding of preexisting social norms.⁸⁰ This contributes to the growing popularity of conduct literature, as the individuals transcending social boundaries sought to integrate themselves into their new social standing.⁸¹ The Loathly Lady's lecture to the knight undermines Steinberg's argument. By assigning the Loathly Lady to the role of older advisor, like Perceval's mother or another authoritative voice, and giving her corresponding thematic rhetoric found in aristocratic conduct literature such as *Beaudous*, Chaucer and the Wife

⁷⁸ Glenn A. Steinberg, "Is Ugliness Only Skin Deep?: Middle English Gawain Romances and the 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" *Arthuriana* 31, no. 4 (2021): 3-28, 4.

⁷⁹ Steinberg, "Ugliness," 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

⁸¹ Kreuger, "Introduction," xxvii.

of Bath show that this ugly old peasant woman contains wisdom and value that even a knight of King Arthur's court can learn from.

The didactic role of the Loathly Lady gives value to people who are not conventionally young, beautiful, or aristocratic. As the Loathly Lady is the avatar for the middle-aged and middle-class Wife of Bath, this also highlights the Wife's personal and societal worth. The Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady focuses on the abstract ideals of marriage rather than the lived, practical advice of the Wife of Bath and the conduct literature such as "The Good Wijf" or "The Wise Mann." Again, this focuses on the issues of wealth and the potential social mobility of women through marriage:

And therefore leerne well this lore:
If thou wolt haue a wijf with eese,
For richesse take hir neure the more (93-96, Wise Mann)

This is later restated:

Sonne, sette not bi this worldis weele,
For it farith bu as a cheri faire (143-144)

"How the Good Wijf Taughte Hir Doughtir" and "How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne" are two of the best-known surviving examples of conduct poems written in Middle English.⁸² They were also specifically written for members of the lower middle class and reflect more accessible applications of behavioral guides than *Beaudous* or *Le Ménagier de Paris*. Sponsler writes that this wide-spread accessibility of the texts, which were first written in the 1350s, were divided by gender but contained principles and language that made them universally applicable to both men and women as well as both adolescents and adults.⁸³ "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" fits the standards and the aesthetics expected by the audience who were readily familiar with this genre.

⁸² Sponsler "English," 285.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 285-286.

Her “Tale” is coated in the aesthetic of an aristocratic Arthurian romance which makes the bitter pill of a middle-class didactic principle easier for Chaucer’s audience to swallow.

This is a marked difference from the other versions of the Loathly Lady tale, which have a more general didactic message of good behavior. The Wife of Bath’s emphasis on social mobility and the importance of class in her “Tale” shows that society is a flawed construct that does not regulate an individual’s worth. As Turner highlights, “it is the inner self that matters.”⁸⁴ This is the same principle that can be learned from the overlapping texts of “The Good Wif” and “The Wise Mann,” which rely heavily on proverbial material to advocate morality and temperance in all things. While the texts were likely written by clerks, “The Wise Mann” specifically cautions against domestic violence: “For over-doon thing unskilfully/ Makith griif to growe whanne it is no nede” (87-88).⁸⁵ The translation of line 87 reads as “being heavy handed.” This is a significant inclusion in male conduct literature, as it addresses the emotional effect of violence towards a female body by a husband. He gives great emphasis to the importance of spousal harmony (73-97). The Wise Mann also encourages his son to marry below his rank as “Though sche be poore, take thou/ noon hede,/ And sche wol do thee more good service / Than a richer, whann thou hast/ neede.” (78-80). Not only does this show the practice of social mobility in marriage, it also provides an example for positive interpersonal relations in marriage. This is very different from Jankyn’s behavior and authority of wicked wives but is similar to the general advice given by the Loathly Lady in her *oratio*.

“The Wise Mann” offers a distinctly bourgeois perspective and formatting that resembles the bedside *oratio* given by the Loathly Lady to her new husband, the Knight. The entire poem measures 152 lines, which is comparable to the 109 lines of the Loathly Lady’s bedside *oratio*

⁸⁴ Turner, *Wife*, 43.

⁸⁵ Sponsler, “English,” 287.

(1109-1218). Chaucer's Loathly Lady spends almost as much time instructing her new husband as the Wise Mann instructs his son and focuses on similar behavioral themes. "The Wise Mann" echoes "The Good Wijf's" emphasis of moderation and keeping God as a center for one's morality. Lines 74-112 focus on how the Son should treat his wife. One point that the Wise Mann returns to is the financial status of the Son's potential bride. He cautions against marrying for money (75, 78, 95-96). This, or rather the nobility of poverty as found in scripture and classical authority, features heavily in the Loathly Lady's *oratio* (1177-1206). The second part of her *oratio* spans lines 1207-1218 which focuses on how no conduct literature teaches people how to treat the elderly:

And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour
Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour. (1210-1212)

Line 1210 is deliberately evocative of the first line of the Wife of Bath's Prologue as the recognizable phrase does not appear again anywhere else in the Tale. While "The Wise Mann" is thematically very different from "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" its message of pragmatism, temperance, and nobility of behavior echoes the Loathly Lady's sentiments in her bedside *oratio*. This is the opposite of Jankyn's approach to education, which fixates on physical violence. Of Jankyn's methodology, Parsons writes that "What Chaucer presents through him [...] is a portrait of a man trying to impose his accustomed [schoolroom] power structures on a space outside of their usual compass."⁸⁶ The home would be the Wife's domain. In an echo of this power dynamic, the Loathly Lady's *oratio* or teaching occurs towards the very end of the Tale when the couple are in bed. This is the place where the five-times married Wife of Bath has a lot of experience.

⁸⁶ Parsons, "Beaten," 169.

Not only do the Wife of Bath and her Loathly Lady evoke the experienced older guides who populate conduct literature, but Chaucer's use of a Loathly Lady as a textual avatar gives a sense of authority that is reminiscent of Gower's aged authorial persona not only to the Wife of Bath, but also to himself. Within the confines of the Wife of Bath's Loathly Lady tale, Chaucer can offer moralizing instruction hidden within a palatable critique of aristocratic society. This Loathly Lady tale is the first to specify an obvious element of the motif which beforehand had only been implied: it is a moral responsibility to treat women, the elderly, and the impoverished with respect. In a possible answer to Gower's "Tale of Florent" and Amans' performance as an inappropriate lover, the Wife of Bath presents her interpretation of the Loathly Lady as a vehicle for her to say that aging or older women still have a role and value in society, even if they are not a member of the nobility. Turner writes that the Wife of Bath's version is unusual because "there is usually no place in stories like this for reasonable older women – and certainly not for older women to have acceptable sexual desires, or to be the ethical heart of the story."⁸⁷ The Wife of Bath's "bad" behavior has given her the experience and the wisdom to tell a didactic Loathly Lady tale that focuses on ethical behavior.

The Loathly Lady's ethical importance is in part signified by the compassion which is given to her by the narrator. While the parodic elements of "The Wife of Bath's 'Prologue'" cast her as sexualized and bawdy, her Loathly Lady is the most eloquent and least grotesque in the tradition. Unlike the "Tale of Florent" or *Ragnelle*, there are no evil women in her Tale. As Turner points out, the limited examples of biologically older women in the Loathly Lady tales are malignant and evil. They are limited to the evil grandmother who plots against Florent and the wicked stepmothers who curse the Loathly Ladies in the "Tale of Florent" and *Ragnelle*.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Turner, *Wife*, 44.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

Chaucer offers a different interpretation of and purpose for aging femininity just as Gower offers a different function and life stage to the aging Amans. One of the ways that he accomplishes this is through the limited description of the Loathly Lady in comparison to “Florent” and *Ragnelle*. Another is through the qualifications that the Wife includes almost as a postscript after the Loathly Lady is transformed into a beautiful, young, fertile, and presumably subservient bride for the now reformed and redeemed rapist knight. In a passage that mirrors the tone and advice of “The Wise Mann” and “The Good Wif,” the Wife of Bath concludes her Tale with:

A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
And she obeyed hym in every thyng
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.
And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t' overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1254-1264)

These concluding lines are a stark contrast to the romantic elements of the “Tale” and a reminder that this version of the Loathly Lady motif has been an interpretation from the Wife of Bath’s distinct perspective. This is very different from the simplistic “happily ever after” offered in Gower’s version, or the short life of *Ragnelle*. The Wife ends her tale with a return to the parodic elements of her Prologue that stem from conduct literature. In an inversion of the feminine ideal of the subservient wife restricted within the confines of her husband’s domestic comforts, the Wife’s ideal husband is a meek man. If a husband is not subservient to his wife, then may he die quickly. This is a humorous and extreme inversion of the feminine ideal that highlights the importance of the lived female experience that is central to both “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and “Tale.” This new understanding of women’s lives opens the possibility for the development

of different roles for women within literature, which Turner sees as stemming from the conflict between the “Prologue” and the “Tale” as an indication of literature imitating life. This is indicative of the grey area that Chaucer creates by blending elements of reality and fantasy within the *Canterbury Tales*.⁸⁹ It is this application of lived experience to literature that allows for the understanding of the didactic message of the “Tale,” which will then go on to influence the lived experience of the reader.

Part of this blending of reality and literature allows for Chaucer to safely critique current societal standards. While Steinberg sees the Wife of Bath and her “Tale” as criticism of the old aristocracy, it can also be read as a reaction to Gower’s much more refined version of the story.⁹⁰ Gower’s Loathly Lady story is not told by his avatar, Amans, but is told as a form of instruction or conduct literature by Genius to Amans/ Gower. This can be seen in the variety of pilgrims that Chaucer creates to tell the “Tales,” most of whom would be seen as members of the growing bourgeois. The tales that they tell also span multiple popular literary genres and styles, which can be seen in other compilations such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as well as Robert de Blois’ *Boudous*, and other books of conduct literature.

The *Confessio Amantis*, which can also be read as conduct literature, keeps to the Boccian tradition of the dream-narrative where one idealized figure or personification guides and converses with a singular character, often a self-styled avatar of the author. Chaucer’s pilgrims follow Gower and earlier fledgling attempts by medieval writers to explore the complexities of the internal self. Confession and self-examination became a literary tradition following Augustine’s *Confessions* (c. 397-400). Self-examination and judgment in textual form resembled an exaggerated internal debate, such as Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* (c.524). Turner

⁸⁹ Turner, *Wife*, 46.

⁹⁰ Steinberg, “Ugliness,” 19.

makes a valid point, “all kinds of very ordinary people are encouraged to express themselves to others.”⁹¹ Chaucer takes great pains to craft the Wife of Bath as an “ordinary” if extraordinary contemporary woman. Her would-be confession of her “Prologue” draws on multiple recognizable contemporary moral authorities which were used to govern morality and behavior.

The “Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” contains a moral that focuses on tempered behavior and personal sovereignty. Both the Wife of Bath and the Knight in her “Tale” have faced restrictions on their social and physical autonomy at the hands of their spouses as the result of internalized ethics. The Wife of Bath provides a contrasting parallel to the Loathly Lady, as her bodily autonomy was taken from her by her spouse, who used male-gendered conduct literature as an authority to physically beat her. This resulted in physical impairment and disability. In her “Prologue,” the Wife of Bath presents herself as justifiably socially unruly. Her impairment, deafness, is the result of physical punishment that was dealt by her husband to restrict her behavior to the confines of normalized gender roles. This violent castigation leaves the Wife of Bath physically impaired as a “result of [her] sinfulness, thus demonstrating a direct link between inward corruption and outward appearance”⁹² The Knight, if he had failed in his quest or not agreed to marry the Loathly Lady, would have been executed by a court of women. They were given the authority to do so by King Arthur. These women are not only representative of the body of the unidentified peasant girl that he had raped, but their authority also comes from the same code of chivalry that the Knight had violated. By learning from the Loathly Lady and internalizing her didactic message, the social balance is restored with his reformed behavior.

⁹¹ Turner, *Wife*, 23.

⁹² Pearman, *Women*, 45.

As in the other Loathly Lady tales, the Loathly Lady's body is a test of the Knight's chivalric behavior. The Wife of Bath's experience with disability makes the Loathly Lady's didactic message relevant to all genders. Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath to break down gender norms by not conforming to them. She does not simply reject them. Chaucer gestures towards new societal norms. The Wife of Bath performs disability in several ways; her deafness, her implied infertility, and her female sex have all been established as physical impairments. This practical experience makes her an authority about disability, which she lends to her mouthpiece, the Loathly Lady. Keeping with the established tradition of the Irish sovereignty goddess, the Loathly Lady transforms once the Knight has processed the didactic lesson and proves his gentillesse or nobility of character. As the Wife of Bath is an expert in disability, a further link is established between John Gower and his *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Interpreting the Loathly Lady as an avatar for the Wife of Bath, like Amans is an avatar for John Gower, disability is given a didactic function within the "Tale".

The Wife of Bath and her Loathly Lady's disabled bodies deviate from the normal idealized physical and socially subservient form of femininity. Pearman points out that even ideal femininity is a form of disability.⁹³ The climax of the "Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" is the transformation of the Loathly Lady into an idealized young woman who is a suitable bride for the reformed Knight. This only occurs after he has processed her moralizing bedside lecture (1087-1218) about how he should treat the impoverished, the elderly, and those who are different from him. In accepting this instruction and changing his conduct, he has learned how to adopt "gentillesse" and perform the role of an idealized knight in an Arthurian romance. Conversely, I believe that the didactic message of the Loathly Lady is not gendered. The instruction that she

⁹³ Pearman, *Women*, 45.

gives the Knight on how to treat people who are physically different from him can be applied by someone of any sex, gender, or class.

The Loathly Lady's physical transformation reflects the internal transformation undergone by her now-husband. The Knight's disgust at his wife stems from her age, physical appearance, and low social class: "Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,/ And therto comen of so lough a kynde," (1100-1101). This statement towards his now-wife, who has just married above her station into the nobility, does not offer a critique of the Loathly Lady as a *parvenue*, but rather a critique of the aristocratic knight. The Loathly Lady condemns his arrogance, which he learned from his social position:

But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse
As is descended out of old richesse,
That therefore sholden ye be gentil men,
Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen. (1109-1112)

While Gower's interpretation of the Loathly Lady idealizes the principles of chivalry and the aristocratic class, Chaucer openly criticizes these views, which come across as hypocritical in the eyes of the Loathly Lady. He may be a nobleman, but he does not act nobly. The Wife of Bath's knight is far removed from the idealized Florent. Steinberg writes that the knight is deliberately removed from chivalric examples such as Gawain and his famous courtesy to show the unnamed knight's "disconcerting lack of gratitude [and] humility."⁹⁴ While this knight is the most petulant and dangerous knight in the Loathly Lady tales, he is also arguably the most representative of lived knightly behavior. As discussed, Arthurian romance acted as a form of conduct literature to guide would-be knights in how to behave. In the same way that the Wife of Bath transgresses the

⁹⁴ Steinberg, "Ugliness," 19.

ideal behaviors of female conduct literature, so too does the rapist knight violate the established standards of chivalric behavior. Even within the confines of the Loathly Lady trope, he is the worst behaved and often rebels against the paradigm that the reader would expect from the protagonist. Instead of being relieved that he answered the riddle correctly and will not be beheaded, he exclaims “Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh;” (913). He bemoans his loss of freedom because he must honor his promise to marry the Loathly Lady (913-918). As Steinberg points out, this is in direct contrast to Gawain’s comparatively enthusiastic acceptance of Dame Ragnelle as his wife: “I wolle do more / Then for to kysse, and God before!” (*Weddyng*, 638–639).⁹⁵ In short, the rapist knight’s behavior towards women is terrible and he does not behave according to chivalric standards. His redemption comes only after absorbing the Loathly Lady’s lesson and applying it to his own behavior.

While the “Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” is an interpretation rather than a parody of male conduct literature, the petulance and bad behavior of the knight, which is critiqued by the Loathly Lady, creates an element of parody. This element of parody, an exaggerated rejection of established gendered behaviors and embracing the opposite for comedic effect, solidifies the link between “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue’” and her “Tale.” Carruthers argues that “The Wife does not identify with the lion that she paints, the old hag. The hag argues deportment-book virtues and her magic is certainly showy.”⁹⁶ She then goes on to detail the dissimilarities between the Wife of Bath and the Loathly Lady. The Loathly Lady is likely much older than the fiftyish Wife, they are not both from Bath, and their lived experiences differ greatly.⁹⁷ She goes on to posit that “to see the Wife as the ugly crone of her tale, devastated by the loss of youthful bloom, is to

⁹⁵ Carruthers, “Wife,” 218.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

sentimentalize her well beyond the context of the text.”⁹⁸ The connection between the Loathly Lady and the Wife of Bath is not one of sentiment, but conduct. It is not the behavior of the Wife of Bath or the Loathly Lady that are aligned, but rather the poor behavior of their male counterparts. While Carruthers argues that the Wife’s lesson to the reader is that financial superiority rather than affection is the secret to a happy marriage, this is evidently not the case, as based on both her “Prologue” and her “Tale.”⁹⁹ It is possible to interpret the Wife of Bath’s secret to a good marriage as mutual respect regardless of class or age.

The “Prologue” and the “Tale” are very different texts, but they are linked through the parodic elements of gendered conduct literature. To the best of my knowledge, neither the Wife of Bath’s “Tale” nor “Prologue” have been previously discussed in terms of parody. Both the inclusion of parody and the answer to the Wife’s riddle link the “Tale” to wider Arthurian cannon, particularly tales involving the virtuous Sir Gawain and other monstrous figures. Sean Pollok’s article places the text in the late medieval Northern Gawain group, which includes *The Weddyng of Syr Gawan and Dame Ragnelle*, *The Turk and Gawain*, and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. All but *The Turk* are discussed at length in this thesis. Pollok argues that these were popular rather than courtly romances that offered critique of the transgressions and poor treatment that the lower classes suffered at the hands of the corrupt nobility.¹⁰⁰ He goes on to argue that while there was no clear distinction between personal and political sovereignty in the Middle Ages, its political connotations were largely defined by interpersonal relationships. He creates a connection between “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the*

⁹⁸ Carruthers, “Wife,” 218.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰⁰ Sean Pollack, “Border States: Parody, Sovereignty, and Hybrid Identity in ‘The Carle of Carlisle,’” *Arthuriana* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 10–26, 10.

Green Knight, and *The Carl of Carlisle* by highlighting the forceful appropriation and bad conduct of the nobility in each of the texts. In both *Awntyrs* and *The Weddyng*, King Arthur is accused of wrongly seizing a minor noble's lands. In the Wife's "Tale," the Knight has raped a young peasant girl, which causes sovereignty to take on not only political but also both interpersonal and gendered significance. *The Carl* and *Ragnelle* texts make this connection even more explicit, which is found through the use of parody.¹⁰¹ Pollok explains:

Romances of this type doubtless express many things, and among these must be comic exaggerations of the typical conflicts that occur when individuals of different social stations, nations, genders, or cultural backgrounds come into forced contact.¹⁰²

In each of the North Gawain texts, he is introduced as the putative poetic hero. In the opening lines of *The Carl* the scene is set:

Lystonnyth, lordyngus, a lyttyl stonde
Of on jjat was sekor and sounde
And douggtty in dede.
He was as meke as mayde in hour
And Jjerto styfe in euery stour.
Was non so douggtty in dede
Sertaynly wyttouten fabull
He was wytt Artter at Jje Rounde Tabull
In romans as we rede. (A 1—6,10—12)

Pollok points out that the narrator's description of Gawain as meek as a maid "in a bour" and "stiff in every stour" possibly links back to the opening lines of "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" in which the nameless knight commits the crime of rape.¹⁰³ Given the links established between the Gawain texts and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" it is possible to read the nameless knight not only as a parody of a chivalric knight, but particularly of Gawain and Gawain-type characters. A

¹⁰¹ Pollok, "Border States," 10-12.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 21.

marked difference between the rapist knight and Sir Gawain is their conduct, specifically their behavior towards women. Even though Gawain desires Lady Bertilak in *The Green Knight* and Carl's daughter, he behaves within the realm of courtly acceptability. In the "Tale of Florent," *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Weddyng of Syr Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, this knight is in danger of bodily harm or death. The knight is a victim. However, virtue prevails, and social order is restored. In the Wife of Bath's "Tale," the Loathly Lady is the ethical center of the story. The Knight is a rapist-:he has committed a violent crime against a woman's body. He is a criminal and a threat to women rather than a romantic hero. By reading the Loathly Lady as an avatar for the Wife of Bath as well as the ethical center of the "Tale," and the rapist knight as a parody of the Gawain-type character, the "Prologue" and the "Tale" are linked in their exposure of practiced male violence.

Conclusion

By listening to, internalizing, and applying the Loathly Lady's didactic message, the Knight has not transformed the Loathly Lady, but rather himself. In learning how to conduct himself as a good person should, his behavior has been restored to chivalric standards. He has redeemed himself. The Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and "Tale" are not only linked by parodic elements of conduct literature, but also by the critique of physical violence against women which was largely perpetuated by authorities of that genre. Physical violence against women is the catalyst for "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" She began by setting the scene as a peaceful, safe, and idyllic world that is typical of an Arthurian setting (857-873). The magic of this setting is created by contrasting legendary figures from the past in which she sets her "Tale" with those that are recognizable. Depictions of sexual assaults occurred when the girls were not within the physical

confines of the jurisdiction of the town.¹⁰⁴ It is true that rape was a concern that was faced by all women who ventured away from home without a man's protection, particularly those women who did travel on pilgrimages, like Margery Kempe.¹⁰⁵ Rape in the medieval period is presented in medieval literature as a "sexual torment" or a direct threat against virtuous Christian women presented by the non-Christian "infidels."¹⁰⁶ That a knight, a defender of Christianity, would commit such an act is shocking.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the episode conforms to the medieval perception that men rape because they want to have sex. A similar thing is implied in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, where the rape of Philomela is treated under "Rapacity" and is treated as though the men were just overwhelmed with desire.¹⁰⁸ This chapter falls under "Avarice," which comments on men taking what they want regardless of the consequences. The presence of this rape, or the forcible assumption of control over a woman's body (which can lead to physical and psychological elements of disability) occurs jarringly at the beginning of the "Tale," immediately after a somewhat lengthy and fanciful introduction (III, 882-888). The inclusion of this illegal action, which is the antithesis of chivalric tradition, causes a sharp break with the Arthurian tradition which was recently established. In doing so, Chaucer has disabled the audience's sense of expectation. Equally, he has inverted the nature of enchantment which is present in Gower's "Tale of Florent." While a Queen had cursed Gower's Loathly Lady due to no fault of her own, the Wife of Bath's Knight has cursed himself and his body through his actions. He can learn from

¹⁰⁴ "Women may go sauflly up and down./In every bussh or under every tree " (878-879). The Knight encountered his victim along a road as he was returning from hunting (884-888).

¹⁰⁵ Shortly after her father's death, Margery Kempe left her husband in 1413 and went on the first of several pilgrimages to Jerusalem and other various Holy Sites throughout Europe. Jay Parini, ed., "Kempe, Margery (c. 1373 – c. 1440)," in *British Writers Supplement 12* (Detroit: Charles Scribners Sons, 2007), 167–83.

¹⁰⁶ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 136.

¹⁰⁷ See Corinne J. Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Suffok: D.S. Brewer, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Karras, *Common*, 136.

the Loathly Lady and apply her advice. This is the transformation that saves not only his marriage, but also his immortal soul. By applying the principles that he learned from the Loathly Lady, which are found in both male and female conduct literature, specifically in the paired “Wise Mann” and “Good Wijf,” he can become a reformed husband in a truly happy marriage.

Both the Knight and the Wife of Bath are parodic characters who flout the traditional expected behaviors of their type. It is highly likely that the Shipman’s fabliau-styled “Tale” was originally written for the Wife of Bath, and this point has been discussed at length by Caroline Dinshaw and Robert A. Pratt.¹⁰⁹ This argument is convincing due to the breadth of existing scholarship. However Chaucer’s intent may have evolved, the Wife of Bath was intentionally given a Loathly Lady Tale to highlight its innate didactic function. The “Prologue” shows Chaucer’s intent to create a practical or lived experience of female conduct within marriage. The Wife of Bath is not a moral ideal for a young lady to follow, but an example of how a woman can conduct herself to engage in social mobility. The bawdy Wife of Bath is a more developed character than the Good Wifje or the Wise Mann. Her behavior and sexual appetites form a parody of the moralizing conduct literature of previous decades, allowing the Wife of Bath’s practical advice and experience to become comedic rather than literal in the eyes of the mixed-gendered audience. Even if Chaucer intended for the “Prologue” to be a parody of female conduct literature, the inclusion of the genre flags the following Loathly Lady Tale as not truly belonging to any one genre. Instead, it contains elements drawn from multiple genres to create a

¹⁰⁹ Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 116.

Robert A. Pratt, “The Development of the Wife of Bath,” in *Studies in Medieval Literature: In Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 45–79, 45. cited by Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 116.

more applicable and universal didactic message. This makes the didactic role of the Loathly Lady and her “Tale” obvious to the late fourteenth-century reader, regardless of their gender.

This didactic “shock factor” is exactly what Chaucer intended for “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Prologue.’” The didactic knowledge that the Wife of Bath offers in her “Prologue” and in her “Tale” transcends gender barriers to offer a unique form of universal (or unisex) conduct literature. The Wife of Bath uses the Loathly Lady as an avatar to break away from bodily determinism. The didactic instruction of the “Tale” moves beyond gender to consider sovereignty as an ethical concept independent of issues like gender and social class. The Wife of Bath establishes herself as a didactic authority figure of both physical and esoteric wisdom. She uses this wisdom to craft a tale that keeps to the tradition of Loathly Lady literature; her “Tale” is a critique of personal character or *gentillesse* as well as the practical application of this *gentillesse* within marriage. Although the Wife of Bath expresses the lived experience of domestic abuse that many women likely suffered as a result of the application of conduct literature, she also expresses a distinctly middle-class experience in a text that expresses anxieties about the behavior of the bourgeois.

While Carter argues that “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” is more focused on “gender role destabilization,” this is not the case.¹¹⁰ While gender roles take a more nuanced role in this Loathly Lady tale, as it is narrated by a female voice, the didactic message is ultimately one of temperance and stability. The instruction given by the Loathly Lady and the didactic message transcends gender and class boundaries. Through the Loathly Lady’s counsel, the Knight’s behavior has been restored to chivalric excellence. While issues of personal sovereignty are present in both of the texts, acknowledging the elements and effects of conduct literature which

¹¹⁰ Carter, “Coupling,” 329.

are present throughout, negates the interpretation that Chaucer's Loathly Lady tale is "a sphere of heterosexual power contestation."¹¹¹ Instead, Chaucer uses the Loathly Lady tale to argue for marital balance and kindness in a society that readily accepts bodily violence.

¹¹¹ Carter, "Coupling," 330.

Chapter IV: The Loathly le Fay: Spectral Disability and the Bifurcated Loathly Lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Introduction

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the best-known Arthurian romances, yet there has been very little acknowledgement of the presence of the Loathly Lady motif within the text. While Loraine Kochanske Stock has acknowledged a connection to the Irish source material, only Ellen M. Caldwell has officially called Morgan le Fay a “loathly lady.”¹ Written in the late 14th century by an anonymous writer referred to as both the *Gawain*-poet and the *Pearl*-poet, the Middle English text combines the two recognizable folk traditions of the sharing of winnings and the beheading game. While these stem from Anglo-French and Irish traditions, the text contains several recognizable elements of a Loathly Lady tale. Key components of the motif, such as the physical transformation of an old woman into a young woman, are noticeably absent. Physical transformation and sexually charged morality tests are present. Most significantly, there is an old woman who orchestrates the morality test of the young knight-protagonist. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has garnered very little academic attention in relation to the Loathly Lady motif because it does not contain a traditional Loathly Lady, nor does the text follow the traditional Loathly Lady motif. However, it draws on the tradition in several important ways. By reading the text through this lens, the wider influence of the motif on Arthurian romance becomes clear.

¹ Loraine Kochanske Stock, “The Hag of Castle Hautdesert: The Celtic Sheela-Na-Gig and the ‘Auncian’ in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas, TX: Scriptorium Press, 2001), 121–48. Ellen M. Caldwell, “Brains or Beauty: Limited Sovereignty in the Loathly Lady Tales ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale,’ ‘Thomas of Erceldoune,’ and ‘The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,’” essay, in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 235–56, 245.

As the Green Knight swings his axe down towards Gawain's neck, Gawain flinches. In this climactic moment of the poem, the Green Knight declares "Pou art not Gawain" (2270). This natural reaction to the axe's swing is indicative not only of Gawain's humanity, but the presence of spectral disability. While Robert McRuer explains spectral disability as "If we live long enough, disability is the one identity that we will all inhabit,"² this flinch reflects Gawain's experience of spectral disability as the fear of dismemberment and his subsequent demise. This beheading game, one of the Irish elements present in the text, first appears to be a test of masculine agency. This perception is undermined by the revelation that the challenge is orchestrated by a woman, Morgan le Fay. The Green Knight is a tool in her plan to challenge King Arthur's authority in the same way that Gawain is an avatar of King Arthur's court. While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a Loathly Lady tale, the poet uses elements of the motif stemming from the Irish sovereignty myth, the "Tale of Florent," and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" Morgan le Fay is not a Loathly Lady, but she does exhibit Loathly Lady tendencies. One of these elements is the essential plot point where the chivalric protagonist must confront his own mortality through facing the inevitability of disability and death as orchestrated by a woman's authority. While other Loathly Lady tales teach the protagonist how to treat the disabled, the elderly, and the Other with respect, Gawain learns to accept the fear of spectral disability as part of his humanity. Richard H. Godden sees Gawain's flinching as a sign of cowardice and a challenge to his identity as an idealized knight.³ It is reflective of the unsustainability of chivalric ideals in the face of mortality and bodily harm.

² Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 200.

³ Richard H. Godden, "Gawain and the Nick of Time: Fame, History, and the Untimely in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* 26, no. 4 (2016): 152–73, 152.

The relationship between the characters' bodies and their behaviors within the poem offer insight into the discursively formed historical perspective of age, ability, and sex within the social and institutional structure of chivalry. To this effect, the poet explores the limitations of the physical body, rendering it an object that changes with time, use, and outside influence. Morgan le Fay shares not only the physical characteristics of a Loathly Lady, but also embodies "spectral disability." Drawing on McRuer's interpretation that disability, and ultimately death, will eventually be experienced by all human beings, this chapter analyzes Morgan le Fay as an embodiment of the medieval awareness of disability and mortality.⁴ One of the key elements of the Loathly Lady motif that is used by the Gawain poet is the didactic lesson that is learned by the protagonist and the reader. In this instance, those morals are about accepting vulnerability. Through Gawain's decisions, the reader learns how to respect and acknowledge their own vulnerabilities or weaknesses with compassion as they would those of another person. With this lesson, the humanity of the characters within the poem emerges, granting a truly intimate and moving glimpse into the fears and perspective of chivalric culture.

An analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the light of the Loathly Lady tales, shows that the practice of chivalry becomes a practice of personal nobility. While publications linking the text to the motif are scarce, Lauren Chochinov discusses the text as a Loathly Lady tale in her Master's thesis.⁵ She classifies the text as "an untraditional loathly lady story that uses the motif's themes and symbolism to emphasize the poem's feminine landscape and the importance of Morgan le Fay."⁶ While Chochinov has connected *Sir Gawain and the Green*

⁴ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 200.

⁵ Lauren Chochinov, "Distressing Damsels: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a Loathly Lady Tale" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 2010).

⁶ Chochinov, "Distressing," i.

Knight to the Loathly Lady tradition, the theory has not been discussed in depth nor received much attention. A more compelling interpretation of Morgan le Fay as a Loathly Lady would be to read her as a bifurcated Loathly Lady figure: Morgan le Fay is the hag while Lady Bertilak is the beautiful young woman. Morgan le Fay's impaired body is not the only link to the motif. By offering new perspective on the Irish influences, and by applying the concept of spectral disability, the Loathly Lady elements ultimately serve the didactic role of contextualizing the moral behavior of a hero. The concept of spectral disability clarifies the Loathly Lady elements that are present within the text ultimately serving the didactic role of testing the hero. While there is no real discussion of sovereignty within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the anxiety of spectral disability permeates the text and heavily influences the actions of Sir Gawain who is a representative of King Arthur's court.

The first section will analyze the effects of spectral disability on the figures of Gawain and the Green Knight. Gawain's obsession with self-perfection and overwhelming fear of spectral disability stems from the Irish sovereignty traditions and *gessi*, societal taboos which are placed on the king's body to regulate his sovereignty. These are discussed at length in the first chapter of this thesis. As important as Morgan le Fay or the other Loathly Ladies are within their tales, the didactic function of each of the texts is always about the personal growth of the knightly protagonist. When viewed in the light of spectral disability, Gawain's reaction to the nick on his neck triggers the true moral core of the text. As he grapples with the idea that no one is perfect, he learns the importance of being true to his word and true to himself, thus finding a form of salvation through self-acceptance.

The second section places Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak within the Loathly Lady tradition. A close reading of their respective descriptions when compared to other women in

Loathly Lady tales will help to establish a tenable connection between the Gawain poet and the wider tradition. Building on the work of Chochinov and Maureen Fries, this section presents the role of women within this text as similar to that of women in a Loathly Lady tale, rather than a traditional romance. In Arthurian romances, women are most often portrayed as impersonal and idealized objects of sexual desire for the Knightly protagonist.⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapters, women within Loathly Lady tales are usually either physically or morally corrupt until the Loathly Lady resumes her idealized form at the end of the tale. As Michelle Sweeney discusses in her chapter, women predominantly serve as a sexual temptation that will lead the knight away from the path of Christian righteousness. She also points out a second role of women within these texts: they sometimes present a moralizing “test” that leads the knight to his salvation.⁸ This theme of salvation, as emphasized by Sweeney, draws heavily on religious connotations within a secular setting.⁹ Morgan le Fay and her prosthesis, Lady Bertilak, do not test Gawain with a goal of obtaining some form of spiritual or physical salvation, but rather his damnation.

The fundamental problem that this chapter seeks to address is the presence of spectral disability within the youthful Arthurian warrior culture as embodied by a manipulative woman. By reading Morgan le Fay as a member of the Loathly Lady tradition, her test of Gawain becomes a part of his journey towards maturity and another stage in the Ages of Man *topos*. Although Fries argues that Morgan le Fay’s loathly appearance is the result of her being a “connector of death with illicit sex and wrongful imprisonment,” she is the only example of an

⁷ Michelle Sweeney, “Lady as Temptress and Reformer in Medieval Romance,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 30, no. 1 (2014): 165–78, 1.

⁸ Sweeney, “Lady,” 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

old person within the text and is the subject of both ageism and ableism.¹⁰ They are treated differently because their bodies do not meet the normative standards of the young court. The way that she is treated by the narrator and her anonymity exemplifies the chivalric perception that old age is not only a sign of weakness or failure, but also femininity. The ageist and ableist perspective of Gawain and the narrator focus the reader's attention on the limitations of her age, ugliness, and physical impairments when she is not ignored. It is this limited perspective that causes Morgan le Fay to appear innocuous and the revelation of her identity and agency to be as shocking as that of a Loathly Lady story.

I: Prosthetic Green Knights: Embodied Inexperience versus Maturity

A physical body that is changed by magic is the nexus of every Loathly Lady tale. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the bodies are “a transmutable, shaping force of identity.”¹¹ While Pax Gutierrez-Neal specifically references the “Green Knight’s disguising flesh and Gawain’s scarred neck” as examples of disability which serve as disguises that conceal the true identity of individuals within the text, the theory of spectral disability can give greater appreciation for Gawain’s fear and morality while on the chopping block.¹² Like Florent in the “Tale of Florent,” and the Knight in “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” Gawain is also at risk of being beheaded. Gawain reluctantly agrees to the Green Knight’s beheading game and the subsequent consequence of losing his own head a full year later in the Green Chapel. This caused Gawain to live in a state of constant awareness of spectral disability and his own mortality for that year. This anxiety is most

¹⁰ Maureen Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance,” *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1–18, 2.

¹¹ Pax Gutierrez-Neal, “Like a Second Skin: Appropriation and (Mis)Interpretation of Identities in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *William of Palerne*,” essay, in *Writing on Skin in the Age of Chaucer* (Walter de Gruyter, Inc, 2018), 169–94, 181.

¹² Gutierrez-Neal, “Skin,” 181.

clearly seen during the three days that he stays in Hautdesert as a guest of the Bertilaks before immediately meeting his fate. Scholars such as Godden and Gutierrez-Neal have fruitfully applied disability studies to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but no one has looked at the implications of spectral disability and its relation to prosthesis within the text. Additionally, this section will prove that elements such as the beheading game links *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the wider Loathly Lady tradition.

The Beheading Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* spans four parts of the story. First, the Green Knight comes to Camelot while the court is celebrating the New Year. He challenges any knight to come forward and behead him if he can return the blow in a year's time. Gawain is the only knight to accept the challenge and does so. The Green Knight then picks up his head and leaves, reminding Gawain of their challenge in twelve months. The second part of the story is about Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel, where he will suffer a blow at the hands of the Green Knight. As in the Loathly Lady tales, he is alone on this difficult journey. Despite the isolation, the harsh terrain, and his ominous fate, Gawain courageously continues. In the third section, he encounters Lord Bertilak who offers him hospitality until the New Year and assures him that the Green Chapel is nearby. In the fourth, Gawain meets the Green Knight in the Green Chapel. He receives three blows from his axe, but only one leaves a slight mark. It is then revealed that the Green Knight is Lord Bertilak, who was sent by Morgan le Fay to test the Knights of the Round Table. Gawain's slight injury may be the happy result of his concealment of an enchanted girdle given to him by Lady Bertilak as part of his failed test. Even though Bertilak commends Gawain for his performance, Gawain is consumed by shame and decides to

wear the green girdle as a sign of his cowardice. When he returns to Camelot, the symbol is reinterpreted by the court as a sign of his bravery.¹³

The beheading game tested not only Gawain's bravery, but also his morality. While this test proves that he is the best knight in Camelot, it is another example of Irish influence in the text. G.L. Kittredge saw the chief elements of the text to be temptation and the possibility of beheading.¹⁴ While scholars such as Claude Luttrell and Stock have elaborated on the Irish elements present in the text, including Luttrell's categorization of the text as a Type 313 folk tale which is commonly found in Irish and Scottish folklore, the beheading game is the most recognizable Irish influence within the text.¹⁵ The beheading game, which originates in the eighth century Irish text *Fled Bricrenn* [Bricriu's Feast], is one of the longest hero tales in the Ulster Cycle. While the comedic tale is preserved in *The Book of the Dunn Cow* (c.1100), the narrative can be traced to the eighth century. Bricriu, a known trickster, invites the nobles of the Uliad, the Ulstermen, to a feast. He challenges the three most famous warriors to a series of challenges. For the final challenge, the three heroes are each challenged by a giant churl to cut off his head if he gets to return the blow. Only Cú Chulainn, the bravest and most famous warrior, agrees. After beheading the supernatural being and agreeing to be beheaded, the churl reveals himself to be Cú Roí, the judge of the test. Cú Chulainn is then celebrated as the best

¹³ Quian Wu, "International Conference on Social Science, Education Management, and Sports Education," in *Journey of Test and Self Discovery: Chivalric Virtues and Human Nature in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Dordrecht: Atlantis Press, 2015), 236–39, 236.

¹⁴ G. L. Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1960), 137-139, 196-197.

¹⁵ Claude Luttrell, "The Folk-Tale Element in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Studies in Philology* 77, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 105–27, 106.

warrior.¹⁶ Both Gawain and Cú Chulainn's bravery is tested by a supernaturally disguised giant who intends to behead them.

While Cú Chulainn is known for his battle frenzy and rage, Gawain's chastity and morality highlight the different requirements for celebrated warriors in the different times and cultures. The fear of disability, impairment, and death hovers over Gawain and determines his actions as much as Christian morality or chivalric standards which define his identity as a knight. A core difference between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the other texts is that the traditional Loathly Lady tales hyperfocus on how Gawain treats others as a sign of internal morality, which leads to the wider didactic meaning of the narrative. This text highlights how even the most idealized knight can never be perfect. Both he and the reader must treat themselves with compassion and gentleness. To some extent, the poem shows that Christian values are preferable to chivalric ones, which are often less forgiving of imperfection in terms of both social and bodily consequences. The poem is similar to other Gawain texts which Sarah Lindsay would categorize in her article as "focus[ing] on questions of what constitutes chivalric behavior."¹⁷ One of the more problematic aspects of comparing the Loathly Lady motif to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the fact that sovereignty is never conceptualized in the same way as the other Loathly Lady stories, nor is it mentioned in the same context. This tale is not about sovereignty in the traditional sense seen in Loathly Lady tales, and so Gawain's behavior cannot be conceptualized in the same way.

¹⁶ George Henderson, *Fled Bricrend = the Feast of Bricriu: An Early Gaelic Saga Transcribed From Older MSS. Into The Book of The Dunn Cow* (London: Irish Texts Society, 1993).

¹⁷ Sarah Lindsay, "Chivalric Failure in 'The Jeaste of Sir Gawain,'" *Arthuriana* 21, no. 4 (2011): 23–41, 23.

Although sovereignty does not exist within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the answer to the Loathly Lady's riddle, it is at the heart of the challenge that the Green Knight proposes to King Arthur's court. He specifically is looking to challenge the leader "Þe gouernour of þis gyng" (225), but Gawain takes the challenge for the King. This sets the precedent of Gawain becoming Arthur's avatar or acting as his prosthesis by taking Arthur's responsibility to deal with loathsome figures in later texts, such as *The Weddyng of Syr Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. Based on this, there is a sense that Gawain is protecting the honor of King Arthur and Camelot as much as he is defending his own honor. While Lindsay sees in *The Jeste of Sir Gawain* that "verbal and legal modes of reconciliation could create more social benefit than knightly violence does,"¹⁸ the same principal can be seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Instead of their unwillingness to behead a stranger with no just cause in the middle of Christmas dinner being seen as discretion, the reluctance of the Knights to participate in the beheading game is intended to show immaturity, cowardice, and a lack of sportsmanship within Camelot, as well as cracks in King Arthur's authority. As is revealed at the end of the text, this was exactly Morgan le Fay's intention. In this instance, Gawain is acting as King Arthur's prosthesis. In testing the young knight, she is testing Arthur's inexperienced sovereignty.

By reading the text as a coming-of-age narrative that not only highlights Gawain's behavior but also shows him taking a step towards maturity, the text can be read as a form of conduct literature like "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" The juxtaposition of Gawain and his host, Lord Bertilak, shows the advantages of growing up. This is a stark contrast between the two primary female characters. Lady Bertilak is celebrated by the narrator for her youth and beauty, especially when compared to Morgan le Fay. Gawain's youth and purity are defining elements of

¹⁸ Lindsay, "Failure," 23.

his character, which are used derogatorily by the Green Knight / Lord Bertilak in both of his forms. King Arthur's youth is also described in an equally pejorative manner "He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered" (86). This implies that his youth makes him juvenile- he is not yet a wise ruler- and thus can make mistakes because of his inexperience. His kingdom is vulnerable because of his youth. The Green Knight uses ageist rhetoric to provoke the Knights to accept his challenge. He implies that they are weak and fearful by insulting their youth and calling them "berdlez chylder" (281). It is ironic yet fitting that the one who has the most unusual physical body is simultaneously the idealized physical figure of knightly maturity within the text. The lengthy description of the Green Knight (180-220) highlights his rich clothes, his big beard, and his imposing physical presence: "Hit semed as no mon myȝt/ Vnder his dynttez dryȝe" (200-201). Lord Bertilak is described in near identical terms, as they are the same person:

Gawayn glyȝt on þe gome þat godly hym gret,
 And þuȝt hit a bolde burne þat þe burȝ aȝte,
 A hoge haþel for þe noneȝ, and of hyghe eldee;
 Brode, bryȝt watz his berde, and al beuer-hwed,
 Sturne, stif on þe stryþþe on stalworth schonkez,
 Felle face as þe fyre, and fre of hys speche; (843-847)

The emphasis in this description, like that of the Green Knight, is on the physical manifestations of masculine maturity. This is indicative of a strong element of the Ages of Man *topos* in this text. Yet, there is no old man in the poem. Old Age and disability are the preserve of Morgan le Fay. Like Lord Bertilak, the supernatural body of the Green Knight is physically beautiful and immune to spectral disability. His power, and the monstrosity of his green hue, is given to him by Morgan le Fay. While the Green Knight is read as having supernaturally green skin and is dressed to match, his appearance is otherwise described as conventionally attractive for a mature knight:

Wel gay watz þis gome gered in grene,
And þe here of his hed of his hors swete;
Fayre fannand fax vmbefoldes his schulderes;
A much berd as a busk ouer his brest henges (179-183)

The description of the Green Knight's appearance continues until line 202. Both his description and that of his alter-ego, Lord Bertilak, emphasize his powerful physical presence and large beard, both of which are hallmarks of a mature male body. The Green Knight's supernatural body makes him the only character that is immune to spectral disability. The Green Knight and the narrator's ageist comments echo Cynthia Rich's perspective that ageism cuts across ethnicities, classes, and (in this instance) genders.¹⁹ While acknowledging that ageism particularly affects women, this poem reflects her theory that "the world is run by old[er] white men."²⁰ The narrator's treatment of Morgan le Fay as an old woman can be seen as what Encarnación Juárez-Almendros classifies as the standard treatment of old women in medieval literature. She explains that "when they appear in literary texts, they usually occupy secondary positions and are negatively portrayed."²¹ This accounts for Gawain and the narrator's ignorance of Morgan le Fay's power and significance. Her anonymity stems from her physical appearance as an old woman. While her body is unremarkable to the young knight, the Green Knight both terrifies and intrigues.

Physically, the Green Knight is unlike anything that would be obtainable by a medieval knight. He is extremely tall, or as the narrator describes him: "Half-etayn in erde I hope þat he were" (140). He comes across as surly and combative, which makes him seem as threatening as

¹⁹ Cynthia Rich, "'We Need a Theoretical Base': Cynthia Rich, Women's Studies, and Ageism," interviewed by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb. *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 3–12, 6. Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, *Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature Prostitutes, Aging Women and Saints* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Rich, "Cynthia Rich," 6.

²¹ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 12.

the axe he carries. The axe itself has a “brod egge / As wel schepen to schere as scharp rasores” (212–13). These coarse qualities are juxtaposed to other more idealized knightly qualities; despite his supernatural appearance, he is handsome and well-dressed in green clothing that has “golde ay inmyddes” (167). In the hand that does not hold the axe, he carries a festive holly branch. These conflicting characteristics help to establish the physical and psychological tension that exist within the text. As Greg Walker points out, the Green Knight’s “disturbing, monstrous aspects are contradicted, and finally superseded, by the perception of a humanity which has to be acknowledged.”²² His behavior is courtly, and his dress is aristocratic. Even though he has supernatural abilities, he plays by the rules of nature.

The Green Knight offers an interesting juxtaposition between the naturally occurring, able-bodied Gawain as well as the two women. As a magical prosthesis of the disabled Morgan le Fay, he can make the long journey from Hautdesert, which would have been difficult for her body. The tension or plot of the poem hinges on the Green Knight’s supernatural ability to survive a challenge that would certainly kill the average able-bodied knight. The Green Knight’s body belies his supernatural nature long before he picks up his own severed head. He is described as:

[A]n aghlich mayster
On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik
And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete
Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were (136-140)

This description highlights the extreme difference between the Green Knight and the young members of King Arthur’s court. His body is described as “half etayn” (140) and “oueral enker

²² Greg Walker, “The Green Knight’s Challenge: Heroism and Courtliness in Fitt I of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Chaucer Review* 32 (1997): 111–28, 112.

grene” (150), but his unusual verdigris and height cause the other knights to pale in comparison to him. He is supernatural and wonderous, but he is not within the realm of a normal able-bodied knight. If Morgan le Fay had not altered his body with her magic to make him her prosthesis, he would not have been able to perform the beheading game.

As Carl Grey Martin points out, the challenge proposed by the Green Knight is typical of the performative challenges favored by the warrior-nobles of the medieval period. “His [self] aggrandizement through public displays of prowess and lucrative war-making, he is also bound by a strict code of behavior meant to restrain and refine his aggression.”²³ The issue of beheading is a class issue. This is first established in the “Tale of Florent,” and then appears as the possible fate of the Knight in “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale.’” These knights are all faced with a challenge in which he could end up beheaded. The central motive in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the potential disfigurement, dismemberment, or demise of either Sir Gawain or the Green Knight at the hands of the other.²⁴ The beheading game that is performed by the Green Knight is an example of aristocratic brutality that is justified under the guise of chivalry. The Green Knight and his game allow Gawain to perform the rare and idealized tenants of chivalry— “honor, prowess, fealty” — while simultaneously exhibiting the brutal reality of knighthood.²⁵ Within the theatrical setting of Camelot, the Green Knight has brought the battlefield to Christmas dinner. As Martin writes, the beheading game shows the horrors of physical destruction and mutilation of the human body.²⁶ This game is an exaggerated example of the war games that were popular courtly traditions within tournaments that took place between the courts of the late-medieval

²³ Carl Grey Martin, “The Cipher of Chivalry: Violence as Courtly Play in the World of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” *The Chaucer Review* 43, no. 3 (2009): 311–29, 312.

²⁴ Martin, “Play,” 311.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

English and French warrior-nobles.²⁷ This beheading game is not just a courtly spectacle, it is a challenge of bravery and integrity that dates back to the Irish tradition.

The challenge presented by the beheading game is a threat to Gawain's ideological and moral purity. If he does not accept the challenge, then he is not the bravest of King Arthur's knights and no longer lives up to the courtly ideal of knightly behavior. In his survival and perceived failure, Gawain learns about the unattainability of being a perfect knight:

"Lo! lorde," quod þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,
"Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue,
Of couardise and couetyse, þat I haf caȝt þare." (2505-2509)

Although he internalizes this shame which is represented by the mark on his neck, King Arthur and his court view the mark as a testament to his bravery as he faced a test that they were not brave enough to attempt themselves. While Gawain sees cowardice and imperfection, he still went to the Green Chapel and accepted the blow even though he was afraid. This is like the behavior of the knights in the English Loathly Lady tales, who not only return to the seat of the authority that would have them beheaded, but also marry the Loathly Lady in order to uphold their chivalric standards. In terms of spectral disability and human vulnerability, the mark on his neck is evocative of the early Irish *gessi* which would have disqualified a warrior from assuming kingship or sovereignty. The significance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is congruent with applicable Christian principals of forgiveness. As interpreted by Godden, Gawain sees this flinching as a sign of his failure to be a perfect knight.²⁸ Gawain calls it a mark of his "couardise and couetyse" (2508). Instead, it is a sign of his extreme bravery. Like the famous Irish warrior,

²⁷ Martin, "Play," 311.

²⁸ Godden, "Nick," 152.

Cú Chullain, Gawain was willing to subject himself to spectral disability through the immediate possibility of dismemberment and death. While Gawain returns to Camelot with a sense of shame (2500-2504), King Arthur comforts him and everyone laughs at his self-deprecation (2513-2514). While Gawain had taken the green girdle as a sign of his shame, King Arthur and his knights appropriate it as a tribute to Gawain's bravery (2516-2521). This shows not only the evolution of the interpretation of bravery in chivalric warrior culture, but also the evolving perception of disability and self-acceptance.

Gawain experiences a different set of consequences to his beheading riddle. Unlike the Green Knight, Gawain's body is mortal and subject to real-world logic. Like Florent and the Knight in "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'", Gawain understands that this will be a fatal blow. While the goal of the others is to avoid execution, Gawain submits himself to the axe and to the sovereignty of another person. He willingly surrenders his autonomy to another and allows someone else to be in control of his life and limb. It is his submission to the Green Knight through which he saves himself— by doing what is required under the terms of the beheading game. Notably, the Green Knight is acting as a would-be executioner on the instruction of Morgan le Fay/ the Loathly Lady figure. Gutierrez-Neal notes that in the text there are many depictions of animals being skinned, which take on a ritualistic tone.²⁹ This inclusion of death and physical trauma increases the presence of spectral disability, as Gawain is approaching the Green Chapel like an animal to slaughter.

Although Gawain appears to be a fully able-bodied and idealized knight, the conflict of the story focuses on his spectral disability— his promised destruction or dismemberment at the

²⁹ Gutierrez-Neal, "Skin," 183.

hands of the Green Knight. At first glance, none of the characters within the poem exhibit a disability. The threat of spectral disability looms overhead. Godden writes that it is this overarching fear of dismemberment that allows the poem to be situated within the framework of disability studies.³⁰ It is also important to acknowledge that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a work of fantasy. The wholeness and integrity of Gawain's body is not rooted in physical reality just as the Loathly Lady's body is not subject to linear time. Gawain's innate sense of perfection ultimately crumbles because it is physically unattainable. Allison P. Hobgood's article presents "prostheses as the basic material of intersubjective exchange and emotional encounter between bodies in the world."³¹ Her interpretation of a prosthesis is "comprehensively undo the conventional limits of the embodied self," which fits neatly with the theoretically magical properties of Gawain's girdle.³² For the Knights of the Round Table, this girdle becomes a symbol of Gawain's integrity and his adventure (2518-2522).

Gawain's identity is partially rooted in the objects that protect his body. The idea of the Knight's armor functioning as a *prosthesis* has been discussed by several scholars, such as Jeremy J. Citrome. He specifically says that there is an "almost prosthetic relationship of the knight to his armor."³³ The term prosthesis can be problematic when applied within a literary context, especially when the figure does not exhibit a disability. As Jackie Leach Scully points out, applying the terminology and rhetoric of a disabled experience to a non-disabled individual

³⁰ Richard H. Godden, "Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1273–90, 1286.

³¹ Allison P. Hobgood, "Prosthetic Encounter and Queer Intersubjectivity in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1291–1308, 1291.

³² Hobgood, "Prosthetic," 1292.

³³ Jeremy J. Citrome, "Bodies That Splatter: Surgery, Chivalry, and the Body in the 'Practica of John Arderne,'" *Exemplaria* 13, no. 1 (2001): 137–72, 164.

can obscure or diminish the experiences of disabled individuals.³⁴ Alternatively, an analysis of the potential for disability within the text can offer insight into the motivation behind Gawain's self-perceived failure. The theory of spectral disability is relevant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as in both Gower and Chaucer's Loathly Lady tales, but in different ways. In the traditional pattern of a Loathly Lady tale, the Knight goes out on a quest in search of an answer that will save him from being beheaded. Gawain, however, is traveling towards his decapitation with no riddle to solve which would offer a preventative solution. He knows that when he finds the Green Knight, he will die. This is another example of the role of spectral disability within the text—he is bound by his chivalric ethics to complete this journey and meet a fate that his natural body will not survive.

While Gawain passes Morgan le Fay's test and lives to fight another day, he will continue to exist under the shadow of spectral disability. Previous chapters have drawn from Julie Orlemanski's theory of disability as prosthesis. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the concept of prosthesis is equally applicable. The inclusion of Morgan le Fay along with more traditional Loathly Ladies provides a valuable insight into the interactional nature between the physical body and social ideology within medieval literature, which is an important theoretical perspective within disability studies.³⁵ This intersectional aspect is not limited to the aged body of Morgan le Fay; it is equally applicable to the young and able-bodied Sir Gawain, who uses various types of prostheses in the text. According to Godden, the technologies of chivalry function as prostheses. Gawain's shield, his armor, his reputation, and even his chastity are

³⁴ Jackie Leach Scully, "Disability and Vulnerability: On Bodies, Dependence, and Power," in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 204–11, 204-205.

³⁵ Based on Joshua R. Eyler's interpretation of the intersectionality of Disability Studies and Medieval Studies: Joshua Eyler, *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

necessary extensions of his physical body which help him to perform his role as a Knight to the standards that he sets. Without these objects, his body is vulnerable and incomplete.³⁶ The protective equipment is not only visually synonymous with the chivalric role of the knight, but also intimately connected with the Knight's body.

Even though Gawain is told that the girdle is not explicitly presented as a magical object, it may contain a protective magical property to any that wear it: "For he myȝt not he slayn, for slyȝt vpon erþe" (1854). In her article, Heather Bamford "provisionally define[s] the terms amulet and talisman according to the criterion of intention."³⁷ Based on her definition, a talisman is an object that is imbued with spiritual significance or power which may exert outside or supernatural influence over the body. While Godden theorizes that this visual depiction and permanent association of Gawain with the object that protected his body is interpreted by the young knight as a mark of shame and a remembrance of his own fragility, it can be seen as fulfilling the role of a prosthesis within a medieval literary context.³⁸

Based on this definition, the girdle can be read as a talisman. In this instance, the primary difference between a prosthesis and a talisman is a matter of practicality and function. A prosthesis is an extension of a person which performs a function. A talisman is an object or a symbol which provides supernatural or metaphysical protection, not necessarily with a logical, practical, or concrete reason. As Margaret Healy explains in her article, the line between a talisman and a prosthesis could be blurred within medieval medical practices. Talismans played an essential role in pre-modern medical practices which would theoretically help to ward off

³⁶ Godden, "Bodies," 1273-4.

³⁷ Heather Bamford, "Talisman, Amulet, and Intention in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 74, no. 2 (2021): 133-48, 133.

³⁸ Godden, "Bodies," 1286.

spectral disability. Healy writes that protective or medical talismans functioned as “prosthetics (attached to the body or inscribed on the skin as tattoos)[...] [that] constituted a highly affective and valuable form of placebo medicine in earlier periods.”³⁹ Based on this interpretation of a talisman or symbol as a form of prosthesis, the protective powers of the enchanted garter that was given to Gawain by Lady Bertilak function as a prosthesis that protects Gawain’s physical body while also expanding his self-defined limitations of what it means to be a knight (his self-concept).

As Healy writes, small physical objects were often attached to the body in hopes of using their curative or protective powers.⁴⁰ Established by Healy’s analysis of objects and texts as medical prostheses, the girdle given to Gawain by Lady Bertilak assumes the role of “an artificial substitute for an ideal skin [that] supplements to counter the deficiency of the all too permeable and vulnerable human skin envelope.”⁴¹ Bertilak’s green girdle, which Gawain later adopts as his symbol, is an example of a talisman. Even if it is not physically capable of protecting his body like his armor, he is told that it is magical, and that this magic will protect him from injury and death. Its effectiveness is not proven within the poem. A contrasting object within the text would be Gawain’s armor, which both physically protects his body as a form of prosthesis while expressing the social connotations of his knighthood, which also arguably protects him to some extent. It is equally possible that the girdle had no magical properties, and Lady Bertilak’s goal was for Gawain to accept something that he would be tempted to conceal from Lord Bertilak, thus failing in the exchange of winnings game. Although the green girdle becomes a symbol of

³⁹ Margaret Healy, “Wearing Powerful Words and Objects: Healing Prosthetics,” *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1233–51, 1233.

⁴⁰ Healy, “Wearing,” 1234-1235.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1236.

Gawain's bravery in the face of death and decapitation for the other members of King Arthur's court, he continues to wear it as a reminder of his shame at the memory of experiencing spectral disability.

II: Morgan le Fay & Lady Bertilak as The Bifurcated Loathly Lady

Key elements of a Loathly Lady tale, such as physical transformation and the explicit discussion of sovereignty, are not included in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, aspects of the Loathly Lady motif that the poet does use are essential to the meaning of the poem. This is examined by Chochinov at length in her master's thesis.⁴² She highlights Morgan le Fay's motivations for the episode, her intentional test of Gawain's morality, and her hag-like appearance as key Loathly Lady elements within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While Chochinov focuses primarily on the French and Irish textual origins of Morgan le Fay, the text's connection to the English and Irish Loathly Lady traditions is much deeper than she proposes. Morgan le Fay's actions, motivations, and body draw from the English Loathly Lady tradition established by Gower and Chaucer.

The seduction test, a key element of the Loathly Lady motif, is tied to the exchange of winnings game. They work in tandem to test Gawain's chastity and chivalric behavior. Lord Bertilak suggests the game to Gawain. Over the course of the three days, each will exchange what they have received during the day (1083-1125). Lord Bertilak leaves the castle to go hunting with his knights while Gawain stays in Hautdesert with the women (1126-1177). Each day, Lady Bertilak comes into his bedroom while he is naked in bed and attempts to seduce him. He refuses anything but a kiss (1290-1307). When Lord Bertilak returns home each night, he

⁴² Chochinov, "Distressing," i.

presents Gawain with the carcass of that day's kill. Gawain exchanges this for the kisses that he received. Gawain fails this test when he accepts a supposedly magical green girdle which will prevent him from coming to bodily harm. He conceals this from Lord Bertilak and wears it to the beheading game. In her article, Lindsay writes that it is the "definition of chivalric behavior that regulates [women] to the role of passive object of exchange and separates her from the male characters."⁴³ This is not true in the wider Loathly Lady tradition, where the Loathly Lady is an active female character. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* this is only partially true. Gawain has chosen to stay in the passive feminine environment instead of hunting with Lord Bertilak. While there, Lady Bertilak does act as an object, Morgan le Fay's prosthesis, but she actively tests Gawain's chivalry. Like the Loathly Lady, Morgan le Fay is an active, albeit silent, female figure in the text. While she does not try to seduce Gawain with her loathly body, she does still orchestrate the seduction test within the exchange of winnings game.

Morgan le Fay's crone-like body embodies the concept of spectral disability and the inevitability of death which permeates the text. Morgan le Fay used Lady Bertilak and her beautiful body as a prosthesis to test Gawain's morality and Arthur's sovereignty. She was unable to perform this task because of the decrepit state of her own physical form, as well as the fact that she is Gawain's aunt. Morgan le Fay also used Lord Bertilak as a prosthesis. Lord Bertilak tests Gawain in his human form by suggesting a game in which both he and Gawain exchange what they have obtained during the day. Morgan le Fay uses her magic to transform his body into the fantastical and intimidating Green Knight. She does not use her magic to transform her own body or appearance to test Gawain, which implies that her appearance and her body are not something that she can alter or control. His ignorance of her significance or identity follows

⁴³ Lindsay, "Chivalric," 24.

Christine Overall's perspective that impairment is rooted in the social context in which it occurs, thus she suffers from the social construct of old age as much as any physical or biological impairment.⁴⁴ Her anonymity is not the result of her identity being concealed by magic, but because of Gawain's ageism. Morgan le Fay's body does not transform, but Gawain's perception of her does.

The resolution of a Loathly Lady tale is the physical restoration of the Loathly Lady figure. Her aged body is magically cured of all impairments. She is not only restored to her youthful appearance, but also often to her elevated social status. Within the context of the English Loathly Lady tale, the resolution or reward for the hero's successful completion of his trial is a happy marriage with a physically beautiful bride. Although this is the reward of the male protagonist, it is rooted in the transformation of the aged female body of the Loathly Lady into the idealized and youthful love object. Morgan le Fay can be seen as the initial physically impaired and repulsive stage of the Loathly Lady due to her physical description, her concealed identity, and the moral challenge that she presents to the protagonist. The beautiful Lady Bertilak, who is first seen and described side by side with the *aunciun* Morgan le Fay, plays the part of the transformed Loathly Lady in her youthful second state. In an inversion of the traditional Loathly Lady motif, it is Lady Bertilak's body that presents the sexually charged challenge to Gawain, albeit at Morgan le Fay's orchestration. By reading Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak as two halves of a whole Loathly Lady, a greater didactic purpose can be seen in their actions, as well as Morgan le Fay's intentionally hidden identity and its sudden revelation. Morgan le Fay's identity is so well concealed by her loathly body that, as Chochinov points out,

⁴⁴ Christine Overall, "Old Age and Ageism, Impairment and Ableism: Exploring the Conceptual and Material Connections," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 126–37, 128.

“she seems to appear out of nowhere.”⁴⁵ The location of the revelation of her identity is interesting, as it is almost at the very end of the text, mirroring the timeline of transformation and revelation of identity within the Loathly Lady tradition.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, sexual temptation serves as one of the two trials faced by Gawain at Hautdesert. Gawain must resist the advances of a beautiful woman in the days before his possible death, rather than satisfy the needs of a loathsome one and be stuck with her for the rest of his life. In both a traditional Loathly Lady tale and in this instance, the hero denies his carnal wishes, be they to give in or to run. Morgan le Fay’s body and Gawain’s ignorance of her offers a point of intersection between feminist and disability theories. Some disability and literary scholars, such as Frida Kerner Furman and Susan Wendal note the parallel between ageism and ableism.⁴⁶ The female body is culturally disabled as it is interpreted as deviant or malformed, according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, which makes feminist disability theory a necessity. She further discusses how and when women differ further from this norm— when they are disabled, disfigured, elderly— they suffer further social repercussions.⁴⁷ As Juárez-Alemendros points out, the “abnormalized female body” occupies a third cultural sphere that is removed from the idealized male figure and the normative young and fertile female.⁴⁸ Some disability and feminist scholars, such as Overall, hypothesize that these women are subjected to two systematic forms of oppression and both are the results of socially

⁴⁵ Chochinov, “Distressing,” i.

⁴⁶ Susan Wendell, “Old Women Out of Control: Some Thoughts on Aging, Ethics, and Psychosomatic Medicine,” essay, in *Mother Time: Women, Aging, and Ethics*, ed. Margaret U. Walker (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999), 133–49.

Frida Kerner Furman, ‘These are not our Venuses: Older Women’s Responses to their Aging Bodies’ in *Mother Time: Women, Aging, and Ethics*, ed. Margaret U. Walker (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 7-22.

⁴⁷ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 1–32.

⁴⁸ Juárez-Alemendros, *Bodies*, 197.

constructed value placed on a body.⁴⁹ An example of this oppression is that Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not recognized by Gawain, the narrator, or the reader because she is subjected to ageist and ableist discrimination.

Gawain first sees Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay within the context of an anonymous group of “mony cler burdez” (942). Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay catch his attention because Lady Bertilak is

þe fayrest in felle of flesche and of lyre
And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer,
And wener þen Wenore as þe wyȝe þoȝt (942-945)

She stands out from the group of women firstly because of her body. Her delicate pale skin and her coloring are the first things that the narrator mentions, which are hallmarks of youth and beauty. She is even more beautiful than Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur. Based on the Gawain poet’s treatment of age within the text, Guinevere’s marriage to King Arthur implies that she is equally youthful. She is described as

þe comlokest to discrye
þer glent with yȝen gray;
A semloker þat euer he syȝe
Soth moȝt no mon say (81-84)

Guinevere’s eyes are the only physical attribute described in the text. A somewhat detailed description of her clothing belies her high status. Her husband, King Arthur, is immediately described as “sumquat childgered” (86). This serves to link to extreme youthful innocence as well. Her age and the details of her appearance are not provided in the text. Lady Bertilak’s appearance is not only described in detail and in direct contrast to Morgan le Fay, but also as “wener þen wenore” (945). This comparison to Guinevere can also be an acknowledgement of

⁴⁹ Overall, “Old Age,” 127.

Lady Bertilak's sexuality and willingness to cheat on her husband, based on the Arthurian tradition of Guinevere's unfaithfulness to Arthur and her notorious love affair with Sir Lancelot. It implies that Lady Bertilak is morally corrupt and a fitting counterpart for Morgan le Fay. Following Lindsay's interpretation of *The Jeaste*, Morgan le Fay's use of Lady Bertilak's body in the exchange of winnings game is another example of the exchange of women in Arthurian romance.⁵⁰ Even though this test was orchestrated by a woman, the test still shows that "the women's role thus seems to primarily involve being the center of the male relationships that develop around her."⁵¹ While the test fails and Gawain's admiration for Lord Bertilak is lost, Morgan le Fay's test ultimately serves to strengthen Gawain's bond with King Arthur and Camelot. Although Lord Bertilak is presented as more mature than Arthur and as the ideal form of masculinity within the text, it is to the young Arthur that Gawain returns and is celebrated.

Unlike the traditional Loathly Ladies, Morgan le Fay is not restored to her youthful body. Even with the revelation of her identity at the end of the text, she maintains her loathly form. The Gawain poet conceals Morgan le Fay's identity in two ways. Firstly, she has all the physical characteristics and impairments that are traditionally associated with the Loathly Lady: she is old, her skin hangs from her cheeks in wrinkles, and her mouth is repulsive (951-969). The cumbersome nature of her body is also shared with the Irish material as well as Gower and Chaucer's established descriptions. Although these characteristics are like each of the Loathly Ladies that have been previously discussed in this thesis, she is not treated as grotesque. I agree with Chocinov that this treatment shows the influence of the Irish tradition, Gower, and Chaucer rather than the later comedic treatment of Dame Ragnell in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen*.⁵²

⁵⁰ Lindsay, "Chivalric," 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 24.

Additionally, Morgan le Fay is dressed similarly to the other Loathly Ladies. Even though her clothing belies wealth and status that others do not exhibit, thus also mirroring the societal respect that others do not receive, she is still dressed in a way that emphasizes her ravaged face and broad form. Though she is well-dressed and treated with great respect by the members of the court, Gawain almost completely ignores her. She is only seen in the company of, or in contrast to, the beautiful Lady Bertilak. Her identity is disguised not only by her own loathsome body, which she has no agency to alter, but also by the desirable body of Lady Bertilak. This shows a commonality that Gawain shares with the other knight-protagonists in the Loathly Lady tradition: he fails to recognize the value of the aged, elderly woman.

Gawain's failure to recognize Morgan le Fay echoes the other knight-protagonists' ability to identify the value of the Loathly Lady in her Loathly form. Lack of perception by the young knight is indicative of the prejudiced ideas about aged and disabled people who are dismissed by those who fail to form a proper judgement of their abilities and attributes. The aged female body is almost totally invisible. Juárez-Almendros explains that "the historical vacuum and lack of critical attention given to elderly women and the disabled as objects of study in the artistic and scientific fields confirm the traditional invisibility of these groups."⁵³ This innate anonymity effectively conceals Morgan le Fay's identity from the young Gawain. Not recognizing his King's dread enemy can also be seen as the poet making a commentary on the foolishness of youth and the bravado of King Arthur's untested court. Like Branchus' Granddame, this old woman of high social rank is dangerous and a threat to the life of the knight-protagonist, who she would see beheaded at the end of a manipulative challenge (1442-1465). The Loathly Lady's

⁵³ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 12.

body provides the true morality test in the Irish and English traditions; the protagonist must join with and satisfy the ugly body of the old woman in a sexual way.

As discussed within the introduction of this thesis, old age is rarely acknowledged as a disability within medieval literature. Juárez-Almendros explains that disability “was central to justifying the inequality and inferiority of women and other disadvantaged groups.”⁵⁴ While scholars such as Tory Vandeventer Pearman and Juárez-Almendros would qualify women as innately disabled within historical interpretation, the figure of the Loathly Lady showcases the impairments that are caused by advancing age, such as blindness, deafness, and the loss of physical beauty at various points. It is important to acknowledge the aged guise of Morgan le Fay as not only a form of prosthesis or a disguise, as Gawain never recognized her as his aunt or King Arthur’s half-sister, but it also makes her disabled as she is unable to physically change her body. One of the reasons that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not fit the traditional paradigm of the Loathly Lady tale is because Morgan le Fay is not able to test Gawain herself. It is a traditional part of the Loathly Lady tales that the Loathly Lady offers herself to the knight in her loathly hag form. Morgan le Fay orchestrates a situation that is quite the opposite; she uses a desirable prosthesis to tempt Gawain. If Morgan le Fay’s appearance is the physical effect of her moral corruption rather than a chosen disguise, her perceived age and her body are not something that she can control. If she cannot control her physical appearance, this changes the way that Lady Bertilak performs her role within the text. She functions as a prosthesis for Morgan le Fay because Morgan le Fay’s body is incapable of performing the task of testing Gawain. Lord

⁵⁴ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 5.

Bertilak ordered his wife to tempt Gawain with her body and her affections as part of Morgan le Fay's large scheme to test Gawain's morality (2358-2365).

While the crone or old woman is traditionally associated with wisdom and knowledge, the old woman becomes associated with witchcraft and un-Christian practices.⁵⁵ As Joseph Snow points out and was discussed in the chapter on the Wife of Bath: "Many women beyond childbearing age, including widows outside of convents, became objects of ridicule and jest, as much in public quarters as in in the public square. Wrinkles, thinning hair, and the effects of osteoporosis (the hunched over female) were stigmatized."⁵⁶ Spectral disability still causes this fear of stigmatization; women are afraid to age as they will lose the societal value that is placed on them within the confines of a still predominantly patriarchal-minded society. Through the awareness of the Loathly Lady motif, it becomes evident that Morgan le Fay exhibits all these listed characteristics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Her identity as a supernatural figure is alluded to by the way she is treated with great deference by the Lord and Lady Bertilak and their court at Hautdesert. While the reverence that is granted to her may initially be perceived as respect stemming from her perceived wealth, the end of the Tale reveals that the source of this unusual reverence is due to her supernatural power. The respect with which she is treated despite her ugliness signals the fact that she is not a "normal" old woman, and this is not an ordinary environment.

Ageism and ableism are both social practices that reinforce the negative values associated with stigmas and liabilities connected to human traits, as well as a "horrific dichotomy" between

⁵⁵ Joseph T. Snow, "Some Literary Portraits of the Old Woman in Medieval and Early Modern Spain," essay, in *Entra Mayo y Sale Abril: Medieval Spanish Literary and Folklore Studies in Memory of Harriet Goldberg*, ed. Fontes Manuel da Costa, Joseph T. Snow, and Harriet Goldberg (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2005), 349–53, 350-351.

⁵⁶ Snow, "Some," 351.

the young and the old in romance.⁵⁷ Based on this perspective, both old age and physical disabilities are viewed as problematic and shameful. This element of revulsion is an essential component of a Loathly Lady narrative. The narrator's disgust in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is evident in the contrast between the body of Morgana le Fay and that of the young Lady Bertilak. The details provided in this description are like the description of the Loathly Lady in Gower's "Tale of Florent" and Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" which helps to cast Morgan le Fay as a Loathly Lady figure. The contrasting description of the two women also directly corresponds to the larger themes of youth and age within the poem because they represent the two stages of womanhood (and the two stages of the Loathly Lady) simultaneously.

Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay are a bifurcated version of the Loathly Lady in part due to the way their bodies are described by the narrator via Gawain's gaze when he first sees them. This scene is significant because it emphasizes the different ways that men perceive and value beautiful young women versus old and ugly ones. As Thomas Hahn writes about *The Jeaste*, "Yet the least active figure- the nameless sister/daughter/lover- turns out to be the most pivotal character, through whom the male relations of power and honor receive definition."⁵⁸ He goes on to explain that within that text, women are a tool by which men establish status and superiority among themselves.⁵⁹ This is equally true in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, this scene shows more about Gawain and his aesthetic perception than it does about the role of the women in the text. Through their comparison and contrast, the old woman and the young woman become intertwined as though they were a mirror image of one another. It is as if they were two

⁵⁷ Wanchen Tai, "'Al We Wilnīp to Ben Old. Wy Is Eld Ihatid': Aging and Ageism in 'Le Bone Florence of Rome,'" *Studies in Philology* 112, no. 4 (2015): 656–79, 659.

⁵⁸ Hahn, *Eleven Romances*, 394.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 394.

halves of a whole person. The two women are also physically linked. After establishing that Lady Bertilak is the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, the line that introduces Morgan le Fay to the text not only shows their union but also Morgan le Fay's dominance. The narrator remarks as the two women enter, "An oþer lady hir lad bi þe lyft honde/ þat wat 3 alder þen ho, an auncian hit semed" (947-948). This is translated as "Another lady led her by the hand, an ancient one it seemed." This defies normal expectations of aging and mobility impairments, as the poet insists on the older woman's agency and pre-eminence in the court. This line is the beginning of a relatively lengthy assessment of the bodies of the two women: "Bot yn-lyke on to loke þo ladyes were/For if þe3nge wat3 3ep, 3ol3e wat3 þat oþer" (950-951). While Lady Bertilak's body encapsulates all of the ideals of contemporary female beauty, Lorraine Koschanske Stock points out in her chapter: "Morgan is the quintessential literary 'loathly damsel' in a graphic portrait of feminine otherness whose details also suggest the classic attributes of the Sheela-na-gig[...]"⁶⁰ While there are multiple possible Irish elements within the text that have not yet been discussed, the connection that Stock sees between the Loathly Morgan le Fay and the sexually explicit fertility symbol seems tenuous. Her "feminine otherness,"⁶¹ as termed by Stock, is magnified by the echoing comparison to the beautiful Lady Bertilak. The equal and opposite description of the two women is reflective of the two primary stages of life for women in medieval romance: desirable love interest or old hag.

The perceived ages of the women lay in the comparison of their faces and their manner of dress, which corresponds to their perceived ages as social status. Lady Bertilak's face is described as "Riche red on þat on rayled ay quere" (952). This is immediately compared to the

⁶⁰Stock, "Hag," 132.

⁶¹ Ibid., 132.

“Rugh ronkled chekeȝ þat oþer on rolled” (953) of Morgan le Fay. Lady Bertilak is wearing a stylish, expensive, and somewhat revealing gown which serves to highlight her youth, beauty, and desirability:

Kerhofes of þat on wyth mony cler perlez
Hir brest and hir bryȝt þrote, bare displayed,
Schon schyrer þen snawe, þat schedes on hilleȝ; (954-956)

This is immediately followed by a description of the attire worn by Morgan le Fay, which equally reflects her perceived age and lack of desirability. Her body is considerably larger than that of Lady Bertilak and is almost entirely covered. What is exposed, namely her face, is a standard description of an old woman. She is not described in terms of hyperbolic description of the Loathly Lady as we see in “The Tale of Florent” or the *Ragnelle* texts. Instead, it is the stark comparison to Lady Bertilak and the narrator’s commentary that creates a sense of repulsion:

þat oþer wyth a gorger watz gered ouer þe swyre,
Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalk-quyte vayles,
Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,
Toret and treleted with tryfleȝ aboute (957-960)

It is interesting to note that her garments are intricately described. While they reflect her lack of desirability and hide her body, the whiteness of her wimple echoes the white exposed skin of Lady Bertilak. The only skin exposed on Morgan le Fay’s body is her aged face, which emphasizes her lack of sexual desirability.

Gawain’s gaze and evaluation of the two women echoes the perspective of the knightly protagonist in the Loathly Lady tales. This passage reflects how he looks at and values the different stages of female life and the different value given to different physical appearances. The role of women within this text is like that of a Loathly Lady tale, rather than a traditional romance. In Arthurian romances, women are most often portrayed as impersonal and idealized

objects of sexual desire for the Knightly protagonist.⁶² Age and its expectations are key features of the Loathly Lady motif. As discussed in the chapter focusing on the “Tale of Florent,” a man can perform various social functions at different stages in his life. This corresponds to the Ages of Man *topos* as analyzed by J.A. Burrow.⁶³ As previously explained, there is no Age of Woman *topos*. Within the context of the poem, Morgan le Fay’s corrupt body engenders the same repulsion, marginalization, and invisibility as the Loathly Lady in the other texts. This is not a disguise that she has devised to keep her identity from Gawain. As Maureen Fries points out, she is physically deformed due to the corrupt nature of her magical powers.⁶⁴ Gawain simply does not recognize her because she looks like an old woman, and his gaze is focused on Lady Bertilak.

Although the contrast between the physical appearances of Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak does highlight the difference between them, the latter’s youth and perfect body do not reflect inner integrity. Morgan le Fay’s elderly guise reflects the negative perception of old women’s bodies within medieval literature. As Eyler states, the negative social perception of the elderly female body reflects “the corporeal deterioration, mental incapacity, dishonest sexual activities, and social uselessness [...] exemplify the association of old women with the disabled.”⁶⁵ This is evident in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the narrator ignores Morgan le Fay unless she is in the presence of Lady Bertilak and thus contrasted. For example, Morgan le Fay is the person seated in a place of honor next to Lord Bertilak at the Christmas Day banquet

⁶² Sweeney, “Lady,” 165.

⁶³ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study In Medieval Writing and Thought* (New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2015), 1-3.

⁶⁴ Maureen Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance,” *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1–18, 5.

⁶⁵ Eyler, *Disability*, 198.

(1002-1003), but Gawain is focused on Lady Bertilak (1004-1012). Like spectral disability, she is easy to ignore in a youthful setting. Her body does not reflect her abilities or power. The constant juxtaposition between youth and maturity or beauty and old age reinforces the importance of time and age in the text. This can be seen in the comparison between Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay in the color and texture of their faces: “riche red on þat on rayled ayquere/ rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled” (952-953). This again highlights the difference between their stages of life. The description of the two women ultimately serves to create a dualism of their sexualized bodies.

The description of Lady Bertilak’s body makes her seem sexually desirable, while the body of Morgan le Fay is sexually repulsive in contrast. Elizabeth A. Grosz emphasizes that sexualized bodies are a polarized tradition that are indicative of sexual difference and social differences which are essential for understanding female disability.⁶⁶ The description of Morgan le Fay is coherent with the feminist conception of “dirt.” Grosz’s interpretation of Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966) gives insight into the “dirty” description of Morgan le Fay. “Dirt” is that which is outside of the established social order, marginalized, undesirable, or a potential threat. Morgan le Fay’s hag-like description gives her all these characteristics. Additionally, the Gawain poet gives great detail of Morgan le Fay’s face: “þe tweyne yþen and þe nase þe naked lyppez/ and þose were soure to se and sellyly blered” (962-963). According to Grosz’s interpretation of Douglas, bodily surfaces, and orifices such as the mouth, nose, and skin embody both anxiety and fantasy through the process of “pollution and purification” in a

⁶⁶ Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 193.

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

sexualized fashion.⁶⁷ Therefore, it is possible to see that the description of their two bodies show the dangers of female corporeality, which are subject to the limitations of time. Godden's article emphasizes the mutability of time and its lack of linearity within the poem.⁶⁸ He writes that there is a profound sense of "a difference between the present and the past, and the uncertainty of what the future holds."⁶⁹ This contributes to the presence of spectral disability within the text. As a bifurcated Loathly Lady, Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak are inhabiting two separate stages of time simultaneously. While Gawain and Lady Bertilak may be rooted in their youthful present, Lord Bertilak/ the Green Knight and Morgan le Fay embody stages of their future.

The female body is forever changing shape from the virginal maiden to the "dirty" crone, but this gradual progression is not seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There is only the juxtaposition of the two extremes. This gendered inconsistency is one of the elements that makes both Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay dangerous to Gawain while evoking spectral disability. Spectral disability in the chivalric warrior culture implies that Lord Bertilak is potentially in both the pinnacle and the final stage of his natural life. Through Morgan le Fay's supernatural agency, he can sustain otherwise mortal blows for the purpose of testing Gawain. As there are no examples of old men within the text, it is implied that this is the final social and physical stasis that Gawain should expect to reach as a male Knight. The feminine negative alternative is aging. The physical characteristics exhibited by Morgan le Fay will also come to Lady Bertilak. They will come to Gawain if he does not die on the battlefield. Juárez-Almendros views the permeable

⁶⁷ Godden, "Nick," 193.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

female body as a direct contrast to the consistency of the male, meaning that this indeterminacy extends to Lord Bertilak as he physically transforms into the Green Knight.⁷⁰

The Green Knight's challenge to the court begins with "wher is," he sayd"/ "Þhe governour of Þhis gyng?" (224-225). When no one immediately takes up his request to play the beheading game, he insults their youth by calling them "berle3 chylder" (281) and questioning their bravery (284-285). This contains a moral implication that Arthur and his knights are not yet fully mature and are boyish or childish in their adventures (309-315). This casts *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a coming-of-age story in which Gawain is tested not only by a Loathly Lady but also by a figure representative of ideal mature masculinity. Lord Bertilak presents himself as a generous and wealthy host. He possesses all the traits and the lifestyle to which a young knight can hope to aspire (876-900). Yet Gawain's tests are alluded to in Bertilak's speech:

"Now schal we semlych se sle3tez of þewez,
And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble
Wich spede is in speche, vnspurd may we lerne,
Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture;" (916-919)

This implies that Bertilak sees Gawain as a supposed expert in courtly behavior and manners, but Bertilak intends to teach Gawain a few things: "I hope þat may hym here,/ Schal lerne of luf-talkyng." (926-927). This learning of "luf-talkyng" is a reference to Gawain's virginity, which he theoretically would lose as he progressed from the first age of manhood into the second. This stasis of virginity is praiseworthy for a young woman, but not for a young knight.

The subversion of the seduction test within the tale as a reflection of gender in relation to identity within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is another element that links the text to the

⁷⁰ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 20.

Loathly Lady tradition. As with the Loathly Lady tales, the knightly protagonist is subjected to unwanted sexual advances which encroach on the personal sovereignty that one should have over one's body. In the Irish material, Niall's willingness to kiss and satisfy the Loathly Lady reveals his worth. In the three Loathly Lady tales, the sexual advances of the Loathly Lady are unwanted due to her advanced age and repulsive physical appearance. The first three protagonists are not worried about the ideological concept of their virginity. In Gawain's case, the issues of sexual desire and gendered action are inverted. Gawain's reluctance to kiss the incognito Morgan le Fay upon greeting her reveals Gawain's goodness, as does his refusal to sleep with Lady Bertilak. Lady Bertilak has been sent by the Loathly Lady figure to tempt and seduce Gawain because her beauty and youth are presumed to make her physically very tempting.

It is evident from his gaze and his behavior towards Lady Bertilak on a social level is chivalrous rather than amorous: "He kysses hir comlyly, and kny3tly he melez;/ Þay kallen hym of aquoyntaunce, and he hit quyk askez/To be her seruaunt sothly, if hemself lyked." (973-976). He is at least aesthetically drawn to the young woman as he does not offer the same physical contact to the *auciun*/ Morgan le Fay. It seems that his willingness to practice physical affection, such as a kiss, is limited to platonic action. The virtuous Gawain's deep ideological association with the Virgin Mary, his personal commitment to chastity, and his loyalty to Lord Bertilak as his host, make Lady Bertilak's bedroom visits and her advances unwelcome. The role of seduction within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is ultimately identical to the role that it plays in the Loathly Lady stories: the act of seduction is always a test of the protagonist's moral character. One of the key elements of the Loathly Lady motif that is used by the Gawain poet is the didactic lesson that is learned by the protagonist and the reader. In this instance, the morals are about vulnerability. Through Gawain's decisions, we learn how to respect and acknowledge our own

vulnerabilities or weaknesses and to acknowledge them with compassion. By applying this lesson, the humanity of the characters within the poem emerges, granting us a truly intimate and moving glimpse into the fears and perspective of chivalric culture.

The standards and perspective of the chivalric environment color the descriptions, the behaviors, and the actions of the characters. Even though the Green Knight is considered monstrous because of his green coloring and supernatural agency, his elaborate clothing and otherwise imposing body presents an intimidating but idealized form of mature masculinity in a chivalric context. Both the Green Knight's and Morgan le Fay's bodies exist outside what Garland-Thompson classifies as the "normate" or normative standard. This normative standard is "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings."⁷¹ This "social figure" is the idealized or accepted image which grants people a position of authority over different bodies.⁷² As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the Loathly Lady epitomizes the social marginalization faced by old women which was based on biological characteristics and expresses the anxieties within the cultural imagination of the period. Mary Leech points out that the Loathly Lady is not just physically ugly, "she is deformed. Since she cannot be a viable commodity for marriage, she is not marketable. Because she is disgusting, she is not subjected to the same regulatory standards as beautiful women. The Loathly Lady is therefore accorded a certain amount of freedom not otherwise permitted to women."⁷³ While this

⁷¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.

⁷² Juárez-Alemendros, *Bodies*, 197.

⁷³ Mary Leech, "Why Dame Ragnelle Had to Die: Feminine Usurpation of Masculine Authority in 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,'" essay, in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 213–34, 215.

is true to an extent, the lens of disability studies provides a different interpretation of the dynamic between Morgan le Fay and the Lord and Lady Bertilak.

Chochinov views the relationship between Morgan le Fay and the seductive Lady Bertilak as an inverted transformation sequence of a Loathly Lady motif.⁷⁴ Instead, it can be seen as a simultaneous expression of the Loathly Lady. While it is Lady Bertilak who tempts Gawain on behalf of Morgan le Fay, her seductive qualities and her willingness to challenge King Arthur's authority, which is represented by Gawain, link her to earlier traditions and embodiments of Morgan le Fay within the Arthurian canon. As Chochinov points out, the seduction games used by Lady Bertilak are similar to those used by Morgan herself in the French romance tradition, such as in *Le roman du Troi* (1160) by Benoit de Saint-Maure.⁷⁵ This further solidifies her role as a prosthesis of Morgan le Fay who is unable to test Gawain due to her deformed and undesirable body. Her close connection with Lady Bertilak, whom she has used to sexually test Gawain's chastity on the eve of his would-be death, implies that Lady Bertilak is not exempt from spectral disability. She is equally morally corrupt and will soon show the physical signs of her ties to Morgan le Fay.

Morgan le Fay uses the Bertilaks as tools in part of her plan to humble Gawain's pride and the pride of Camelot, as he is the avatar of the court. His pride and his obedience to his hosts are tested in a way that evokes the "Tale of Florent," which appears in the *Confessio Amantis* under the sin of "Disobedience," as he must obey the rules of courtly and Christian respectability in a bedroom setting and beyond. Although she is hardly present within the text, Fries sees Morgan le Fay as "the family beauty [who] would seem more to the role of the heroine than that

⁷⁴Chochinov, "Distressing," 4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

of the counter-hero.”⁷⁶ The role of the counter-hero is the most powerful of the three roles of women that Fries has identified: the heroine, the female hero, and the female counter-hero. As a counter-hero, Morgan le Fay disobeys social expectations of women and morality. Drawing on Joseph Campbell’s work, Fries elaborates that a heroine is an entirely passive figure that is only vaguely described. She is not challenging to the hero of the story and primarily functions as a wife or love interest.⁷⁷ However, Morgan’s hatred of Guinevere is one of the main reasons for the initial challenge: “For to haf greued Gaynour, and gart hir to dyze” (2460). Within the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Guinevere can fit Campbell’s definition and can thus be categorized as the heroine of the story, but not neatly. Female heroes actively help the heroes to uphold patriarchal values. Lady Bertilak is not a female hero. She is the prosthesis of Morgan le Fay who seeks to defy the accepted patriarchal construct of Obedience, which could allow her to be categorized as a counter-hero.

Based on Fries’ categorization, the traditional Loathly Lady fits neatly into the category of female hero. Granting that none of the female characters fit neatly into set character types, there is no need to find all these set types in one tale. By looking at the female figures in light of these traditional types, the role of women within the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* becomes much more significant than usually thought. The traditional Loathly Lady can be read as the hero of her story. She has saved the life of the knight with her knowledge, whom she has instructed and helped to grow within the expectations of society. The counter-hero actively violates the norms of the Arthurian patriarchy. Fries writes that this is consciously done through the practice of “greater or lesser magic, and/ or sexual seduction, sometimes leading to destruction.”⁷⁸ Fries

⁷⁶ Fries, “Lady,” 2.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 2. Citing Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1968).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

categorizes the Wife of Bath as a counter-hero.⁷⁹ This is yet another example of how the Gawain poet borrows elements of certain established literary concepts, such as the Loathly Lady trope, to form their own commentary. Like the Loathly Ladies of the Irish and English traditions, Morgan le Fay's aged appearance is not the result of natural linear aging, but rather the effect of magic on her body and her spiritual corruption.

In her juxtaposition to Lady Bertilak, who acts as her prosthesis, or even to Lord Bertilak, who acts as her prosthesis to present a masculine chivalric challenge, Morgan le Fay challenges Arthur's sovereignty via Gawain. Her challenge's manipulation of chivalric moral and social standards casts her in the type of Branchus' Granddame in the "Tale of Florent." The challenge's test of the knight-protagonist's morality and her corrupt body allows her to be read as a Loathly Lady. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* turns away from the marriage motif that has developed within the "Tale of Florent" and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" Instead, ideas of the knight's honor and truth to his word, and the worthiness of Camelot and its values. While Gawain's unobtainable personal ideals echo the chivalric standards of the other Tales, his actions and reactions highlight the tensions between chivalry and Christianity within the text. The reaction of Arthur and the court to Gawain's adventure is reminiscent of the bedside *oratio* in "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'": one must base one's morality in Christianity rather than chivalry. Through this, one can learn to not only forgive others but also oneself.

Conclusion

Although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a Loathly Lady tale, recognizing that the poet is drawing on key elements of the Loathly Lady tradition helps us to understand the

⁷⁹ Fries, "Lady," 2.

poem in a new way. The role of women within the text is much more significant than previously recognized. Acknowledgement of the Loathly Lady elements connects the text to a wider tradition of English texts that deal with issues of disability and didacticism. The didactic moral of the text shows the evolving nature of chivalric ideals and practice within society, which are fading in the light of a more personally accessible Christian morality. By casting Morgan le Fay as a Loathly Lady figure, many connections emerge between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the English Loathly Lady tradition. While the Loathly Lady is initially an Irish element, and the Green Knight is an interpretation of the supernatural churl who plays a beheading game in the Irish source material, her actions and her appearance show the influence of Gower and Chaucer on this text. While the text can be read as a chivalric challenge of masculine authority, the inclusion of the Loathly Lady elements shows that women have much more significant and active roles in the text than previously realized.

Each of the plots of the English Loathly Lady tales center around hostility towards Camelot and the violation of chivalric behavioral standards. In “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” the knight has violated the rules of chivalry and Camelot. Instead of protecting the weak, he rapes a young girl. He is challenged to a beheading game by Queen Guinevere and her ladies. In the “Tale of Florent,” the young ideal knight of Camelot is captured by the manipulative grandmother of a knight that he had honorably killed in battle. In chivalric culture, Branchus’ death could be interpreted as an occupational hazard and an example of the presence of spectral disability. His grandmother had no authority to have Florent captured, nor to challenge him to a beheading game as revenge for her grandson’s honorable death. Like Morgan le Fay, she is the nexus of power within the castle. Although it is Bertilak’s castle, Morgan le Fay is a figure of authority.

Morgan le Fay is the first Loathly Lady figure that is not initially encountered in a natural setting. Gawain does first encounter Lord Bertilak in his normative form while he rides through a wooded setting, which is an inversion of the traditional first encounter between the knight and the Loathly Lady. Elements of conduct literature can be seen in Gawain's behavior, especially towards the beautiful Lady Bertilak. The Loathly Lady is a conservative figure who ultimately restores the ideals and values of chivalry after a period of social turmoil and moral decay. Morgan le Fay's explicit intention with the beheading game was specifically to challenge the renown of the Round Table: "Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle" (2456), but also to frighten Guinevere to death: "For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe" (2460). As discussed in the next chapter, Guinevere is typically an amoral and problematic female figure in Arthurian romance. Lady Bertilak's comparison and established superiority to Guinevere presents her sexuality and her beauty as challenges to Christian behavioral standards.

In the English Loathly Lady tradition, the transformed bride asks her new husband if he would rather have her ugly and loyal or beautiful and take his chance with her fidelity. When he gives her the option to choose for herself, this donation of sovereignty grants him the best of both worlds: a beautiful and loyal wife. Lady Bertilak's involvement in Gawain's bedside challenge shows the dangers of feminine beauty and sexuality in medieval romance. Yet she does not actually sleep with the chaste Gawain. Morgan le Fay's motivation behind the beheading game was to get rid of the problematic Guinevere whose famous affair with Sir Lancelot undermines Arthur's sovereignty and contributes to the fall of Camelot. In attempting to get rid of Arthur's problematic wife, she was protecting her brother's sovereignty. This conservatism is yet another Loathly Lady tendency as it casts Morgan le Fay as a positive figure in the text.

The juxtaposition of Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay not only binds them together as a simultaneous expression of the two forms of the Loathly Lady, it also shows the intrinsic nature of spectral disability and femininity given that they are representative of the two ages of woman in medieval romance. Unlike Gower's description of the Loathly Lady or the later grotesque figure of Dame Ragnelle, Morgan le Fay's loathsomeness comes only from her intimate comparison with Lady Bertilak. While her appearance is corrupted through black magic, it is not treated as supernaturally ugly; she is just perceived as old. Although the Green Knight's body is monstrous due to its hue, his stature, courtly behavior, and manner of dress cast him as a pinnacle of chivalric masculinity. This is the same for the normative Lord Bertilak. In passing the beheading game and the sexual test, Gawain has taken a step towards maturity. While he may have initially admired Lord Bertilak as an ideal mature male figure, the revelation of his identity and the role that he played in Gawain's deception and *travaill*es negates any admiration he may have felt for the older knight. As Gawain steps into the next stage of his life, he will remain true to himself and his ideals.

Gawain's behavior and the didactic lesson that he learned causes the text to take on an element of conduct literature in a way that is reminiscent of *Perceval* or "The Wife of Bath's Tale." His self-perceived failure at losing the exchange of winnings game ultimately allows him to escape with his life. The revelation of her identity at the end of the text not only changes how we view the old woman in light of her true identity, it also changes how Gawain views himself. Gawain is not only related to his uncle, King Arthur, he is also related to Morgan le Fay. Micheal Twomey writes, "Gawain believed that his worth came from the blood of his uncle,

Arthur (357), now he learns that the same blood is Morgan's."⁸⁰ His self-deprecation is an expression of not only his humanity, but also the inapplicability of perfect chivalric ideals in the face of spectral disability and death. This is a didactic moment not just for Gawain, but also for the reader. While a traditional Loathly Lady tale teaches how to treat the disabled, the elderly, and the Other with courtesy, Gawain's failure shows that we should extend the same kindness to ourselves. While the other texts focus on how we treat others, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* highlights how we can never be perfect, and thus must treat ourselves with compassion and gentleness. To some extent, the poem shows that Christian values are preferable to chivalric ones, which are often less forgiving of imperfection.

⁸⁰ Micheal W. Twomey, "Morgain La Fée in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: From Troy to Camelot," *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*, 1996, 91–115, 113.

Chapter V: Loathly Figures, Spectral Disability, and the Abuse of Sovereignty in the
Gawain Romances

Introduction

Dame Ragnelle is the most grotesque, the most magical, and the most human of the Loathly Ladies. Her deformed body and her bad behavior follow the traditional Loathly Lady trope by creating a stabilizing chaos within the text. In building on Mary Leech's chapter found in Passmore and Carter's anthology, it is possible to see for the first time that this stabilizing chaos is a recurring feature in the Gawain romances that contain a Loathly type figure, specifically the titular Carle from *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (c.1400) and the ghost of Guinevere's mother in *The Awyntrs of Arthur* (late fourteenth to early fifteenth century), which also contains an episode that mirrors the *Ragnelle* texts.¹ Although each of these Loathly figures temporarily disrupts the status quo of the courtly environment through their unusual bodies and bad behavior, they transform not only themselves but the characters around them in a positive way that ultimately restores conservative chivalric values to the corrupt court of Camelot. By casting this social critique in the guise of a romance, Geraldine Heng believes that "cultural discussion, [and] cultural transformation in the service of crisis and urgent contingency" can occur within this "safe space."² In the *Ragnelle* texts, the Loathly Lady causes chaos when she becomes the bride of Gawain. This event has two textual connotations: it is an ultimate test of his courtly behavior and that of the other members of the court, as well as a catalyst of humorous

¹ Mary Leech, "Why Dame Ragnelle Had to Die: Feminine Usurpation of Masculine Authority in 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle,'" in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 213–34.

² Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 18. Cited by Glenn A. Steinberg, "Is Ugliness Only Skin Deep?: Middle English Gawain Romances and The 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" *Arthuriana* 31, no. 4 (2021): 3–28, 9.

repulsion. This stabilizing chaos is a response to spectral disability within the selected Gawain romance texts, as all readers are aware of the larger narrative and the inevitable death of King Arthur, the destruction of the Round Table, and the fall of Camelot.

The first section will look at the conservative chaos that is caused by the bodies and the behaviors of the three Loathly figures. This is particularly relevant in terms of conduct and behavior, as they reflect contemporary social anxieties about the *nouveau riche's* infiltration and corruption of traditionally aristocratic environments and standards. The second section focuses on the application of spectral disability as a personal and a societal anxiety within the texts. The third section will analyze how the conservative chaos and spectral disability show the corrupt nature of Arthur's doomed sovereignty. The three texts share Loathly figures who provide didactic messages about the evolution of sovereignty and nobility from political and social status to personal conduct.

The three texts share the setting of Inglewood Forest, which Thomas Hahn describes as a place where the Otherworld is close at hand.³ *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* begins when King Arthur and his knights are hunting deer. Arthur becomes separated from his knights and encounters Sir Gromer Somer Joure, who claims that his lands have been wrongfully taken from him. He tells the king that he must return alone to the exact spot in one year's time with the answer to the riddle "What do all women want?" If Arthur cannot provide a satisfactory answer, then Sir Gromer will cut off his head. Gawain offers to help his uncle search for the answer. He goes alone to Inglewood Forest, where he meets a Loathly Lady, Dame Ragnelle, who is Sir Gromer's sister. She offers him the answer if he will marry her. Gawain consents and

³ Thomas Hahn, "The Awntyrs off Arthur: Introduction," *The Awntyrs off Arthur: Introduction* | Robbins Library Digital Projects, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-awyntyrs-off-arthur-introduction>. np.

returns with her to Carlisle, where Arthur is holding court. Gawain and Ragnelle are married, she transforms into a beautiful young bride, and she later dies. The later ballad version, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* or Child Ballad 31, is essentially a retelling of *Weddyng* as a song for professional musicians. In *The Carle*, Gawain and Bishop Baldwin find themselves in need of shelter after hunting and finding themselves in Inglewood Forest. The Carle is a giant and a churl, who is not dispossessed of his landholdings. Instead, he has a reputation of killing all guests who stay at his castle. Gawain survives a beheading game and a sexual test through his noble actions and chivalric behavior.

Questions of moral behavior and land disputes are also present in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. The text is separated into two episodes. This first takes place on the shore of Tarn Walding, a lake in Inglewood Forest. There, Gawain and Queen Guinevere encounter the hideous ghost of Guinevere's mother, who warns her against the sins of adultery. In the second episode, Sir Galeron of Galloway accuses King Arthur of taking his lands unjustly, like Sir Gromer in *Ragnell*. He demands satisfaction through mortal combat. Gawain takes this challenge and nearly kills him but is stopped by Guinevere and the knight's lady. Sir Galeron becomes a knight of the Round Table and the ghost is released from purgatory. Each of these texts have a resolution that qualifies as a Happy Ending—peace and order is returned to Arthur's court, Gawain is the hero, and a conservative sense of sovereignty is regained after the interactions with the Loathly figures.

The Loathly figures selected not only follow the pattern of figures in traditional Loathly Lady tales, but they each create stabilizing chaos through their bodies as well as their actions. As a result, they evoke a wider interpretation of spectral disability because they are didactic figures who point out the cracks in chivalric society in the hopes of saving Camelot and Arthur's

doomed sovereignty. These individuals, who have varying strange bodies and uncourtly behaviors, achieve this in different ways. One of the Loathly figures is not a Loathly Lady, but a Loathly Lord. The Carle in *The Carle of Carlisle* is evocative of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as the churlish giant in the Irish source material, *Fled Bricrenn*. His unusual body and uncivilized behavior not only echo the stabilizing chaos created in the *Ragnelle* texts, but it also highlights the same societal anxiety. The standards of aristocratic behavior and values are dying due to the newfound social mobility of the lower echelons of society, who seek to be included in the higher ranks. To this extent, he is a Loathly Lord. As the *Ragnelle* texts are heavily influenced by previous Loathly Lady tales, such as “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” the *Ragnelle* texts can be read in the light of conduct literature for the first time. The behavior of the Carle and Dame Ragnelle and their unusual bodies not only show how not to behave in courtly settings, but also how people should or should not respond to the physically and socially different, thus proving their personal nobility.

Including these texts as non-traditional variants of the Loathly Lady tale show the evolution of the Loathly figure as it is affected by the shifting social and political issues of the time and the changing readership for romance as it became a more popular genre. The traditional Loathly Lady disrupts the normal social order by being a chaotic force that ultimately leads to a conservative solution and the reinstatement of traditional chivalric ideals. This chaos and conservatism can be seen in the stabilizing “happy endings” of each of the texts, which largely focuses on the social status of the characters. Even then, the texts highlight a growing criticism of the established ruling class by confronting Arthur’s abuse of sovereignty. In a return to the standards set by the Irish source material, a good king must also be a good person. While Leech uses theories of social order and disorder as put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Douglas to

explore the tenuous nature of Arthur's authority, this chapter will examine the Loathly Lady, particularly Dame Ragnelle, as an embodiment of spectral disability that pertains to the fear of the loss of control over a body be that due to age, impairment, or enchantment for the first time.⁴ Dame Ragnelle's role as the Loathly Lady offers an interesting insight into the aspects of disability, the perception of the body, and the social role of identity politics. The social model of disability, which Encarnación Juárez-Almendros explains as "presents an alternative to the conventional ways of explaining disability as an individual tragedy or curse, or as a medical problem that needs to be cured or repaired focuses on the reaction of the wider public to the individual with the impairments," expounds the chaos that is initially caused by the loathly figures.⁵ The chaos not only shows the bad behavior of the court, it also serves a didactic function for the reader.

To study this chaos and the literary trope of the Loathly Lady it is necessary to draw from both disability methodologies and concepts from aging studies due to the similarities between ableism, the discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities, and ageism, the discrimination or prejudice against a particular age group. As Juárez-Almendros explores in great detail in her book, the aged and the disabled body are viewed as "inferior and unproductive."⁶ Ageism and ableism not only traverse through time, but also through boundaries of classes and ethnicities.⁷ Not only do older and non-traditionally able-bodied characters occupy negative or secondary positions in the rare instances that they are visible within a text, the recurring roles that they inhabit, such as the hag or witch and other figures that exist on the fringes of society

⁴ Leech, "Why," 214.

⁵ Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, *Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature: Prostitutes, Aging Women and Saints* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 2.

⁶ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

within a variety of genres, highlights the cross-cultural obsession and apprehension of aged bodies which are “redolent of vulnerability and death.”⁸ Juárez-Almendros notes that the “old hag” is critically considered to be an “unchanging and recurrent[...] used to create humor and satire without questioning other deeper needs fulfilled by the frequent use of these abject female figures.”⁹ Within this context, Dame Ragnelle is a physically and behaviorally deviant figure, as are the Carle and the ghost. While she follows the traditional path of the Loathly Lady, Dame Ragnelle’s representation differs because of the historical context which directly influences her behavior, her body, and her didactic function.

I: Stabilizing Chaos via Loathly Bodies and Behavior

The Loathly Lady (or Lord) provides a test of character and a warning that a change needs to be made. Spectral disability, or the fear of becoming like a loathly figure, be it through physical appearance, social position, loss of sovereignty, or death, is a catalyst for conservative positive change within the texts. Although these characters have frightening supernatural appearances and their behavior can be seen as threatening to the members of Camelot with whom they interact, their goal is to help prevent the inevitable fall of the Round Table through the reestablishment of a stable and ethical social equilibrium within the realm. Although the Loathly Lady figure has evolved to suit the needs of the Arthurian narrative, s/he is still a didactic and stabilizing presence, even though s/he initially violates established social principles, such as the rules of hospitality. Even though the setting and the audience of these tales have shifted away from the aristocracy and the center of political power to offer a wider critique on those institutions, the didactic message of the Loathly Lady is still focused on the courteous

⁸ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

treatment of the Other and what that says about the able-bodied individual's nobility. In the canonical Loathly Lady tales, the Loathly Lady undergoes a physical transformation from her chaos-inducing body to a beautiful, idealized form. While the loathly figures in the supporting texts do transform, it is not necessarily a physical transformation. The ghost appears in a state of horrifying decay which reflects the corrupt state of her sinful soul. She does not physically transform in this interaction. It is implied that she ascends to heaven at the end of *The Awntyrs* and presumably assumes a beautiful state. The Carle does not physically transform but changes his behavior.

Dame Ragnelle, as a canonical Loathly Lady, does follow the traditional path of physical transformation. She not only occupies two forms, but also two texts. She is the titular character in the fifteenth-century English poem *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, which survives in a sixteenth-century manuscript Bodleian 11951, formerly Rawlinson C.86.¹⁰ It also appears as the fragmented and later ballad "The Marriage of Sir Gawain." This fragment survives in the Percy Folio as Child Ballad 31.¹¹ This ballad is unique among the collection as it is a song for professional minstrels, rather than a folk or popular song.¹² Both of these texts are acknowledged to be heavily influenced by Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale.'" ¹³ Although a similar bride appears in Child Ballad 32, or "King Henry," Dame Ragnelle stands out among the Loathly Ladies for several reasons.¹⁴ Firstly, she is the only one who is named. As Leech points out, she is also "the only Loathly Lady whose physicality is related in lengthy and

¹⁰ Thomas Hahn, ed., "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle: Introduction," *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle: Introduction* | Robbins Library Digital Projects, accessed October 26, 2023, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hahn-sir-gawain-wedding-of-sir-gawain-and-dame-ragnelle-introduction>.

¹¹ Francis James Child, ed., "31: The Marriage of Sir Gawain," *The Child Ballads: 31. The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/child/ch031.htm>.

¹² Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Dover, 1965), 256.

¹³ Child, *English*, 288.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

graphic detail, along with her voracious appetite and appalling table manners.”¹⁵ Additionally, her presence in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* does not end with her transformation. Instead, she maintains a disruptive presence in King Arthur’s court until she passes away. Even in her beautiful form, she is a reminder of Arthur’s wrongful treatment of her brother, whose lands he had wrongfully given to Gawain, and the court’s lack of hospitality for her. Until her death and her transformation into a memory or intangible presence, she was a living reminder of King Arthur’s flaws. Although order has been restored, her presence triggers the memory that Arthur misused his sovereignty to appropriate her brother’s lands, her home, and gave them to Gawain. As Leech explains, this is why she had to die.¹⁶ In death, she is transformed into a spectral ideal of femininity that reaffirms masculine authority even though it is she who originally showed the cracks in the social structure.

The *Ragnelle* texts not only highlight the bad behavior of the Loathly Lady, they also detail the bad behavior in King Arthur’s court. The ideals of the young court center around idealism, youth, and beauty. It is interesting to note that both Guinevere and Arthur- the two characters who are the subject of the text’s moral critic- are directly quoted in expressing their disgust at Dame Ragnelle in the earlier *The Wedding*:

"Alas!" then sayd Dame Gaynour;
So sayd alle the ladyes in her bower,
And wept for Sir Gawen.
"Alas!" then sayd bothe Kyng and knyght,
That evere he shold wed suche a wyghte,
She was so fowlle and horyble. (543-547)

¹⁵ Leech, "Why," 213.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

This poor reception of Dame Ragnelle, who had lost her home and social status due to King Arthur's abuse of power, is a violation of the medieval practice of hospitality. I see hospitality as a linking theme between many of the Gawain romances as well as the Loathly Lady tales as it sets a standard of acceptable or unacceptable behavior towards outsiders or Others. In both Gower and Chaucer's tales, the Loathly Lady is reluctantly but courteously made welcome in King Arthur's court. She is accepted as the knight's bride, and he accepts her into his bed as a form of sexual hospitality.

The lack of hospitality expressed by the court for Dame Ragnelle is generated by her own unladylike behavior as much as her loathly body. The description of her behavior is another carnivalesque exaggeration that fuels the description of her abnormally large body. Her sexuality is described as equally voracious. In the "Tale of Florent" and other Loathly Lady tales, a curtain is drawn over the sexual acts of the Loathly Lady and her new husband. Dame Ragnelle links Gawain's sexual prowess with his *cortsey* or courtly behavior. She tells him:

"A, Sir Gawen, syn I have you wed,
Shewe me your cortesy in bed;
With ryghte itt may nott be denied." (629-631)

The seduction of Gawain by Dame Ragnelle is similar to the seductive test that he experiences in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and is a direct parallel to the sexual hospitality that he experiences while staying at the Carle's castle. Dame Ragnelle, as an outsider, is a guest in King Arthur's court. As his betrothed, she is specifically a guest of Sir Gawain. Gawain was also subjected to sexual hospitality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as *The Carle*. James A.W. Heffernan traces the practice of sexual hospitality's origins to the *Odyssey*.¹⁷ He explains

¹⁷ James A.W. Heffernan, *Hospitality and Treachery in Western Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1.

that the concept of hospitality in western culture is ubiquitous and nuanced; it is based primarily on principles of reciprocity and mutual obligation between the host and the guest.¹⁸ Absolute and conditional hospitality are both opposite and inseparable as they are related through the principle of reciprocity.¹⁹ Heffernan quotes Immanuel Kant's proposed law of universal hospitality as "the right of a stranger to not be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another."²⁰ An interpretation of the practice of hospitality as a domestic incarnation of sovereignty: the host will provide a welcoming environment for their guest in exchange for the guest abiding by their rules and behavioral standards.

The Carle increases the stakes of this exchange of hospitality to deliberately threaten and take the lives of his guests. He is a crude giant "Nine taylloris yerdus he was hyghtyt" (259), but like Dame Ragnelle, his behavior contributes heavily to his loathsomeness. His hostile behavior and hospitality, not necessarily his height or strength, is the threat to Gawain's physical safety. He is also a threat to his morality in his attempts to manipulate Gawain into violating social standards of hospitality. In *The Carle*, Gawain succumbs to the sexual temptation and hospitality of his hosts but still acts in a courteous way. As in the tales, the social equilibrium of the stories is reestablished because of Gawain's continuous chivalry. In this instance, he is rewarded with marriage to the Carle's daughter. This shifts the point of the Carle's hospitality practices from a demonstration of Gawain's nobility to serving the social climbing goals of the Carle. By marrying her to Gawain, he secures an excellent match for her. This is a part of his own rehabilitation and success at the end of the text.

¹⁸ Heffernan, *Hospitality*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7. citing Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 320.

Gawain acting as a host in the *Ragnelle* texts is a unique situation for him; as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Carle of Carlisle*, he is a guest in the home of another knight. It is his subjection to their authority as his hosts and their potentially life-threatening requests which provide the challenges that allow him to prove his chivalric nature. Unlike the homeless Dame Ragnelle and her dispossessed brother, the Carle holds authority over his own castle and lands which are on the outskirts of Arthur's authority. As the Carle is the lord of his castle, the Carle's guests must follow his intentionally life-threatening customs. His guests must obey these rules because of his gendered authority. He maintains sovereignty over his castle and those within even though he behaves in a cruel way because he is a man. For the female, disfigured, and powerless Dame Ragnelle, her behavior is just seen as horrific. As a woman who has been made poor and powerless through the theft of her brother's lands, her failure to follow social etiquette is viewed as monstrous as the Carle's abuse of power within his home. In each of these three Gawain romances, the practice of hospitality is corrupted and violated, thus showing poor manners and lack of personal nobility. The Carle's practice of hospitality often results in the death of his guests (99-102), Sir Galloway in *The Awntyrs* arrives with the intent to fight to the death (411), and the court is not welcoming to Dame Ragnelle because of her deformed body (543-547). Conversely, Dame Ragnelle's behavior at her wedding violates the standard of hospitality within Arthur's court, thus further ostracizing her from the ranks of the nobility.

The hideous appearance of the Loathly Lady is traditionally augmented by the juxtaposition of her body to articles of material wealth that are associated with the aristocracy. Dame Ragnelle follows this trope and further separates herself from the upper class also by flashing her wealth, which further emphasizes her lack of knowledge or respect for aristocratic social cues. For example, Gower's Loathly Lady, who does not express her identity as a princess,

is made to look even more hideous when the servants attempt to make her look more presentable (1745–1760). Although Glenn A. Steinberg explains that Gower’s tale has no connection to the *nouveau riche*, as the purpose of the text is to direct the behavior of the aristocratic male reader towards obedience. R. F. Yeager elaborates that “the operant principle in the *Confessio* is reunification of all parts divided . . . [which] submerges . . . the familiar critique by estate—a separation which is in itself divisive—in favor of narrative exempla with the potential to address human failures common to every class.”²¹ While Yeager focuses on the necessity of aristocratic obedience through the ritualistic practices of chivalry and sovereignty and the transformative properties of coronation, the scope of his chapter mirrors the scope of “Florent”— both are restricted to the *stregthe* and *vois* of the nobility.²² Class issues are central to the Wife of Bath and her tale, but the context is still limited to the realm of the aristocracy.

The Canterbury Tales is firmly rooted in aristocratic tradition even though certain tales, like “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’” can be read as a wishful move towards a more egalitarian society, as Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley interpreted in her chapter.²³ While this may not be the case, both the “Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale’” and the *Ragnelle* texts address the growing anxieties around the changes in established social structure as the middle class grew. Although Steinberg argues that class issues and social mobility were the primary focus of “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Tale,’”²⁴ these issues and the role of the Loathly Lady are much more expanded upon within the

²¹ R.F. Yeager, “The Politics and the Strengthe and Vois in Gower’s Loathly Lady Tale,” in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 42–72, 59. Cited by Glenn A. Steinberg, “Is Ugliness Only Skin Deep?: Middle English Gawain Romances and The ‘Wife of Bath’s Tale,’” *Arthuriana* 31, no. 4 (2021): 3–28, 15.

²² Yeager, “Politics,” 60.

²³ Elizabeth M. Biebel-Stanley, “Sovereignty through the Lady: ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’ and the Queenship of Anne of Bohemia,” in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute publications, 2007), 73–82, 73.

²⁴ Steinberg, “Ugliness,” 15.

Ragnelle texts. Like the Wife of Bath, Dame Ragnelle violates every standard set by female conduct literature. In doing so, not only does she offer an explicit critique of the nobility, but she also entertains the reader and makes them laugh.

Dame Ragnelle's behavior at her wedding does not simply isolate herself from the social class into which she is marrying and now nearly leads; her very presence seems to mock the fundamental expectations of that caste. In the *Weddyng* text, she is described as "nott curteys" by the guests and ate "as moche as six that there wore" (602-603). This behavior is doubly troubling, as she was born into the upper ranks of the middle class. She is the sister to Sir Gromer Somer Joure, the dispossessed knight. She reflects the aristocratic anxiety regarding downward social mobility and the corruption of the elite through the inclusion of the lesser orders as equals. In the taking of his lands and through the magical "nygramancy" of her stepmother (691-693), Dame Ragnelle had lost her chance to marry a rich man of her own class. Not only does this differentiate her from the other figures in the Loathly Lady tradition, who are decorous or members of the aristocracy themselves, it also links her more with the churlish figure of the Carle. Not only is he a member of that same class, but also has questionable table manners and indulgences; he can drink nine gallons of wine in a single gulp (283-294). As Hahn writes of Dame Ragnelle in *The Weddyng*: "her appearance and her behavior— her raggedness, poverty, and general unkemptness, and her antisocial and indiscriminate consumption of vast quantities of food at the wedding feast— make clear that her repulsiveness is a function of her low estate and not simply a wild monstrosity."²⁵ Their shared behavior while eating food is not only unrefined and inconsiderate of those around them, but it also evokes the sin of gluttony.

²⁵ Hahn, "Ragnelle: Introduction," np.

To build upon Raluca Radelescu's interpretation of *The Carle of Carlisle*, the *Ragnelle* texts are also romances that highlight the tensions between the lower classes and the aristocracy, and the resistance of the nobility to accept the growing lower social orders into their weakening ranks.²⁶ Radelescu argues that it is the change in the Carle's behavior that makes him a fitting member of King Arthur's court.²⁷ For Dame Ragnelle, by virtue of her gender, her idealism is rooted as much in her behavior as it is in her body. Steinberg writes in his article that the monstrous figures in the Gawain romances are representations of "the medieval *nouveaux riches*."²⁸ He goes on to explain that while the Wife of Bath was bifurcated between herself and her Loathly Lady, "the Gawain Romances seem to indicate that ugliness is only skin deep; Chaucer seems to suggest that ugliness runs a bit deeper."²⁹ While the figures of the Wife of Bath, Dame Ragnelle, and the Carle definitely express anxieties about how the aristocracy views these lower classes and the potential threat that they pose to their established sovereignty, the "ugliness" of the figures in the Gawain Romances stems from their behavior which does not conform to the accepted patterns of aristocratic sensibilities. Dame Ragnelle and the Carle have the inverse experience of being accepted into the ranks of the aristocracy because of their exposure to the idealized behavior of Sir Gawain.

Ultimately, the social order is restored at the end of these three texts, not weakened. Steinberg believes that this is in part because Gawain, who represents the idealized version of the aristocracy, submits himself to the Carle's "byddyng" (523) and Dame Ragnelle's "sovereynté"

²⁶ Raluca L. Radulescu, "Extreme Emotions: Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle and the Danger from Within," *Arthuriana* 29, no. 4 (2019): 57–73, 58.

²⁷ Radulescu, "Extreme," 59.

²⁸ Steinberg, "Ugliness," 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

(*The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* 697).³⁰ Gawain treats the Carle and Dame Ragnelle in the same manner the rising gentry wish to be treated by the aristocracy. If the aristocracy treats the gentry with respect and welcomes them within their ranks, social tensions will ease as the gentry conforms to their expectations. It is this kindness and respect that reforms the Carle and transforms Dame Ragnelle.

The Awntyrs off Arthur equally highlights the bad behavior of the aristocracy in Arthur's court. This was once a popular literary tale that fits within the standards of a Gawain romance. Unlike *Ragnelle*, *The Carle*, or the later ballads, scholars such as Hahn have concluded that *The Awntyrs* does not have its origins in oral tradition. It is a deliberately written work with a complex rhyme scheme, narrative structure, allusions, and specific references that firmly anchors it in the realm of Arthurian literary canon.³¹ The tale itself is bifurcated into two distinct halves. Although neither section contains an encounter with a hag figure, it is valuable to read this text within the didactic context of the Loathly Lady tales. Both halves of the "adventure" focus on a conservative reform of the Round Table. However, the first "episode" contains a supernatural grotesque female figure with a didactic message. The horrifically detailed description of the "ghost" of Guinevere's mother describes her rotting flesh as torment for the sins that she committed in life, the same sins that she hopes her daughter will avoid. In *The Awntyrs*, the ghost is described in terms similar to the modern conception of a zombie. In her didactic diatribe, we learn that this decomposition is caused by her sexual behavior, vanity, and immorality while she

³⁰ Steinberg, "Ugliness," 13.

³¹ Hahn, "Introduction: Awntyrs," np.

was alive. She was Guinevere's mother and had passed her bad behavior to her daughter. She warns her daughter to correct her behavior and presages threats to Arthur's sovereignty.

A disfigured decaying ghost of a once beautiful queen makes for an intriguing Loathly figure. While the inclusion of a ghost is unique in Arthurian romances and a Loathly figure in her own right, she can be read as a bifurcated version of the Loathly Lady when facing her daughter, Guinevere. Guinevere followed in her mother's footsteps to not only become a beautiful queen, but also an adulteress. Her mother's ghost begs her to renounce this behavior so that she does not meet the same fate in the next world. This echoes Pearman's interpretation of the beautiful female body in the Loathly Lady tales as a threat to social order: "while the body that fits the standards of male, chivalric desire actually threatens its foundations, the Othered body strengthens them."³² Although she is not a Loathly Lady, the tormented spirit of Guinevere's mother is described with the same grotesque hyperbole as Dame Ragnelle. In this instance, the ghost is a reversed version of the Loathly Lady. Although she was exceptionally beautiful in life, her behavior and moral corruption has led to her suffering and physical putrefaction. She uses her condition as a cautionary tale to the entire court, not just to her daughter and Gawain. Her warning contains the didactic element of the poem. As Hahn explains, "the conduct of knights and ladies must conform to Christian precept, and that the court must narrow the chasm between its excessive consumption and the desperate poverty that besets others in the community: material and spiritual concerns must coincide."³³ The focus of the moral on the marginalized

³² Tory Vandeventer Pearman, "Disruptive Dames: Disability and the Loathly Lady in the Tale of Florent, the Wife of Bath's Tale, and the Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle," in *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe: Examining Disability in the Historical, Legal, Literary, Medical, and Religious Discourses of the Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy J. Turner and Tory Vandeventer Pearman (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 291–311, 306.

³³ Hahn, "Introduction: Awntyrs," np.

individuals in society makes the didactic message remarkably similar to the edifying elements typically found in a Loathly Lady tale.

Although Dame Ragnelle, the ghost of Guinevere's mother, and the Carle of Carlisle are monstrous, Steinberg explains that they present appealing elements of escapist fantasy for the medieval audience.³⁴ Dame Ragnelle and the Carle both flout the established norms of physical possibility as well as decorum, causing a sense of "self-criticism, escapist desire, and carnivalesque identification for the medieval *nouveau riche*."³⁵ The most significant element of this self-identification is the poor treatment of these figures by the aristocracy. Although these figures are heavily "othered," they belong to the aristocracy on some level. The ghost was once a beautiful queen. Her continuous abuse of her social positions leads her to the loss of her defining aristocratic characteristics, specifically her beauty and her humanity, after her death. Just as the Carle and Dame Ragnelle can be seen as escapist figures of the *nouveau riche*, the ghost is an embodiment of the decaying corrupt aristocracy. For the *parvenus*, being author and readers, the ghost is a carnivalesque expression of the aristocracy getting their comeuppance for their abuse of sovereignty and morality.

II. Spectral Disability as Embodied by Loathly Figures

Pearman writes of Dame Ragnelle that "though she transforms, the specter of her grotesque body remains under the surface of her youthful and beautiful body."³⁶ The monstrous forms of Dame Ragnelle, the Carle, and the ghost and their behaviors elicit the fear of disability and death in the minds of the able-bodied. The dreadful descriptions of these three figures fit

³⁴ Steinberg, "Ugliness," 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁶ Pearman, "Disruptive," 310.

within Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque, as applied by Leech to Dame Ragnelle, but they are also within the realm of physical possibility.³⁷ Dame Ragnelle's body encapsulates the spectral disability that lingers over King Arthur's court and the audience of the tale. Her physical, mental, and social degradation are possible for everyone at the table, if they happen to live that long. Camelot is situated in a magical reality where it is possible for someone to become cursed by dark arts, such as "nygramancy." Still, Dame Ragnelle's deformities are not recognized as magically inflicted. To Gawain and the other members of the court, her impairments appear to be the organic effects of her perceived age and social status. Through advanced age, reduced status, or bad behavior, a beautiful woman or a noble knight can become a monster in the eyes of the youthful court. While Dame Ragnelle embodies the anxiety of social degradation as the result of physical impairments, the ghost of Guinevere's mother embodies the fear of bodily decay and the inevitability of death. To this extent, spectral disability is used as a didactic tool within these texts.

Spectral disability haunts Arthurian Romance as the genre focuses on a chivalric warrior culture. The possibility of injury or death is inevitable for Gawain and the knights of the Round Table. Due to their youth and idealism, reminders of these sad ends come in other forms. The specter of death and disability is not limited to the body of Dame Ragnelle or the appearance of the grisly ghost. It is also present in the landscape. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Awntyrs* is set in either winter or autumn, during the "fermysones." Zawacki explains that this would place the story somewhere between the 11th of November and the 2nd of February.³⁸ By setting the story in an autumnal or winter month, the author deliberately introduces themes of

³⁷ Leech, "Why," 214.

³⁸ Alexander J. Zawacki, "A Dark Mirror: Death and the Cadaver Tomb in 'The Awntyrs off Arthure,'" *Arthuriana* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 87–101, 89.

death and dying at the very beginning of the text. It is not simply death that is immediately present, but the fear of death as well. This fear is immediately felt by the deer: “That for drede of the deth droupes the do” (54), as well as the darkness that appears in the middle of the day, “The day wex als dirke /As hit were mydnight myrke” (75-76). The *Ragnelle* texts, the *Awntyrs*, and all but the original Loathly Lady are Arthurian romances. This sets the stories not in the realm of contemporary reality, but in a distant idealized past. Leigh Haught points out that the audience of these texts would be aware of the wider context of the narratives, as well as the inevitable end of the wider story.³⁹ This knowledge that Camelot will fall casts a shadow of spectral disability over the texts in the sense that the reader knows that we all will one day die.

These texts stem from a period in which actual cases of marginalization caused by gender, malformations, and illness were not widely documented. Maureen Fries has argued that this causes the literary interpretation of the female body to have various functions, as can be seen with the descriptions of Dame Ragnelle and the ghost.⁴⁰ As Juárez-Almendros clarifies, the inclusion of vulnerable and corrupt bodies challenges the “compulsory ideal of a body conceived as a finished, complete, and whole product isolated from others.”⁴¹ Disability and spectral disability take on a prosthetic function within literature as “the forceful inevitable presence of the universal condition of human beings resisting the illusory desire of normativity.”⁴² The description given of the version of Dame Ragnelle in the later ballad version reads as an actual deformity rather than the effects of old age on her body:

Then there as shold have stood her mouth,
Then there was sett her eye;

³⁹ Leigh Haught, “Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers: Gender and Genre in ‘The Awntyrs off Arthure,’” *Arthuriana* 20, no. 1 (2010): 3–24, 3.

⁴⁰ Maureen Fries, “From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance,” *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 1–18, 8-9.

⁴¹ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

The other was in her forehead fast,
The way that she might see.
Her nose was crooked and turned outward,
Her mouth stood foule awry;
A worse formed lady than shee was,
Never man saw with his eye. (57-64)

As with the prematurely aged Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, these are not the ravages of old age but a twisted deformity that reflects the dark witchcraft that has caused it. However, the negative effects of this magic only extend to her outward appearance.

Her physical appearance is part of the test of the Loathly Lady, as the way that others react to how she looks reflects their character. Their reactions are based on the contemporary perception of the disabled female body. Female characters in the works of western literature, such as the Wife of Bath, display the severe consequences of unruly bodies and their supposed predisposition to diabolical behavior and social abuse. Fries argues that witchcraft became a metaphor for the stigmatized disease of syphilis, which was intensely gendered female and tied to the lower social orders.⁴³ These women are portrayed as monstrous, stylized examples of the grotesque and moral corruption.⁴⁴ Gawain's unflappably courteous behavior to Dame Ragnelle becomes even more heroic within this context, as he continuously treats her with respect while the other members of the court are repulsed by her physical appearance. Both in *Ragnelle* and the ballad versions, Arthur's reaction to her physical appearance shows the metaphorical cracks in his armor.

In keeping with an established element of the Loathly Lady trope, Dame Ragnelle's physical impairments are the result of a curse that has been placed on her by her wicked stepmother. Her appearance is singular; she does not appear to simply be an old woman, but

⁴³ Fries, "Lady," 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

something monstrous. The reaction of the court to her physical appearance, her manners, and her lower social status still evokes the phenomenon of ageism. In her interview with Valerie Barnes Lipscomb, Cynthia Rich explains that ageism is most notably experienced by women.⁴⁵ Dame Ragnelle's physical appearance directly affects Gawain's position within the court. In this state, she cannot perform established social, erotic, or procreational roles. Instead, Gawain has assumed responsibility for her in her mental and physical decline. This is no small task, as Juarez-Almendros explains that post-menopausal female bodies were categorized as poisonous.⁴⁶ The reaction of the court to Dame Ragnelle's inclusion would echo the audience's expectation of the typical medieval separation between fictional old women and the romanticized docile virgins and the nurturing mother. This contrast would become more apparent during the late renaissance and the seventeenth century, but the germination of this idea is evident in both *Ragnelle* texts.⁴⁷ While Dame Ragnelle exhibits possible real-world impairments, they are not naturally occurring.

With her cursed body, Dame Ragnelle blurs the line between the natural and the supernatural. Through the lens of Disability Studies, it can be argued that Dame Ragnelle's body has been severely impaired through the negative effects of black magic. As O'Connell points out in his conference paper, the effects of magic on the body of the Loathly Lady varies from text to text.⁴⁸ In the later ballad version, Dame Ragnelle has been "witched" (179) but in *The Weddyng*, she explains that her body has been deformed by her stepmother's use of necromancy:

For I was shapen by nygramancy,
With my stepdame, God have on her mercy,
And by enchauntement;

⁴⁵ Cynthia Rich, "'We Need a Theoretical Base': Cynthia Rich, Women's Studies, and Ageism," interviewed by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb. *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 3-12, 6.

⁴⁶ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁴⁸ Brendan O'Connell, 'I was shapen by nygramancy': The Enchanted Body in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*," from International Medieval Congress, Leeds, 2009. Document sent by the author.

And shold have bene oderwyse understond,
Evyn tylle the best of Englonde
Had wedyd me verament,
And also he shold geve me the sovereynté
Of alle his body and goodes, sycurly.
Thus was I disformyd. (691-698)

The grotesque details of her body are made more shocking through their comparison to normative female features (*The Weddyng* 231-245). Academic discourse surrounding female disability in early modern literature predominantly focuses on examining the negative social and cultural interpretation of women's bodies.⁴⁹ The anatomical abnormalities of the Loathly Lady and the churlish knight's gendered bodies, their abnormal abilities, vulnerabilities, and ascribed meanings have consequential social significance within the texts.

Based on the historicized consideration of the ties between gender and bodily ability as the result of a sociocultural production, as established by scholars such as Pearman, the bodily otherness of the ghost, the Carle, and Dame Ragnelle express the social anxieties of the able-bodied reader. While medieval authors did not have access to our present understandings of sex, gender, or bodily ability, these three texts help to show the results of the interaction between those with bodily differences and society.⁵⁰ With this social model of disability studies, it is the attitude and perspective of the court that is corrupt. Pearman writes that medical and rehabilitation models of disability studies focus on the "restoration" of a disabled body to a socially constructed norm.⁵¹ This is particularly evident in most Loathly Lady texts, as her body is "restored." The concept is present in the *Ragnelle* texts, but the implications are more nuanced. Through the incorporation of spectral disability, it becomes clear that it is not Dame Ragnelle's

⁴⁹ Juárez-Almendros, *Bodies*, 17.

⁵⁰ Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

⁵¹ Pearman, *Women*, 2.

body that needs to be reformed; it is the court's behavior and reaction to a disabled person. This reaction is not necessarily rooted in disgust, but also in fear for their own future bodies, as can be seen in *The Awntyrs*.

In keeping with the Loathly Lady trope, the physical appearance of Guinevere's mother did not reflect her internal qualities during her life. Guinevere's mother is now a specter whose once beautiful body is loathsome, decomposing, and impaired from living. She returns from the grave to warn her daughter of the consequences of moral corruption. She is in a grotesque state of decay which mirrors the corruption of her soul, which will also be Guinevere's fate if she does not change her own sinful behavior:

Bare was the body and blak to the bone,
Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde.
Hit waried, hit wayment as a woman,
But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde.
Hit stemered, hit stonayde, hit stode as a stone,
Hit marred, hit memered, hit mused for madde (105-110)

The ghost of Guinevere's mother is being punished for adultery and pride. These are the same sins that are associated with the beautiful Guinevere. Her mother's immorality may not have corrupted her physical body during her lifetime, but her spectral form is both terrifying and unrecognizable. She embodies not only the fear of aging, but also the fear of death and damnation. She warns her daughter and Gawain against immoral behavior, instead advising them to "have pité on the poer [...] Sithen charité is chef" (251-252). She hopes that this didactic message will change her daughter's behavior so that she will not suffer the same fate. To this effect, her didactic message contains an element of conduct literature as she is a mother guiding the behavior of her daughter.

The textual presence of death within life gives special credence to the moralizing message that the ghost gives to her daughter. This example of a woman instructing a woman, specifically her daughter, recalls examples of medieval Conduct Literature, such as *How the Good Wiff Taughte Hir Doughtir*, one of the few Middle English poems to be directed to women outside of the ranks of the aristocracy and the convents. Written in the fourteenth century, it shares thematic elements with its corresponding text *How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne*. Both works are framed around a parent instructing a child about proverbial advice, morality, and courteous behavior.⁵² This is congruent with the social standing of the author and the reader of *The Awntyrs*. These two texts continued to be popular for several centuries and would have circulated contemporaneously with the Gawain romances. It also subverts the idea of women just giving women bad advice about how to trick men, such as La Vielle in *Le Roman de la Rose* and the Wife of Bath.

Like *The Good Wiff*, the ghostly mother presents moralizing advice about how to be a good woman to her daughter. Haught writes that “the interaction between mother and daughter functions as an important commentary on the inevitable limitations associated with any conception of history, temporal stability, or power.”⁵³ Zawacki points out that the encounter with the ghost has revealed the true nature of their moralities to both Guinevere and Gawain to no avail. They “fail to integrate the knowledge of this reality into their lives and psyches.”⁵⁴ This failure to process the didactic lesson presented by the ghost creates a link between the two episodes that foretells the destruction of Camelot.

⁵² Claire Sponsler, “The English ‘How the Good Wiff Taughte Hir Doughtir’ and ‘How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne,’” in *Medieval Conduct Literature: An Anthology of Vernacular Guides to Behavior for Youths, with English Translations*, ed. Mark D. Johnston (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 285–303.

⁵³ Haught, “Mothers,” 3.

⁵⁴ Zawacki, “Dark,” 87.

The ghost's didactic message is not simply personal to Guinevere, although her immoral behavior directly leads to Arthur's loss of sovereignty and the fall of Camelot. It is also applicable to the reader and the wider courtly audience. The warning of the ghost, who tries to save her daughter from suffering the same fate, makes the ghost a personification of the past in the same way that the Loathly Lady and her spectral disability embody anxiety for the future. Both Dame Ragnelle and the ghost differ from the conventional Loathly Lady trope; they do not express the threat of spectral disability as the fear of aging and inevitable death, but rather the fear of deformity, disfigurement, and damnation. The deformed bodies of Dame Ragnelle and the ghost do not invoke the natural process of aging. Instead, they are unnatural, or supernatural. Both Dame Ragnelle and the ghost acknowledge the existence of the afterlife and the power of the demonic, while the other Loathly Ladies do not. While all Loathly Lady tales feature magic of some sort, these figures confront the realities of death and moral judgment in the way that the others do not. Their appearances cross the line of a grotesque or carnivalesque representation of disability into the monstrous. They have been carefully constructed with the intent to shock, appall, and instruct. The didactic message of the ghost is specifically directed at her daughter and Gawain who are representatives of the Round Table. As with the moralizing lesson of the Loathly Lady tales, her multifaceted advice is applicable to anyone who chooses to heed it.

As the ghost disrupts the natural environment of the lake by turning day to night, causing rain and wind, Dame Ragnelle disrupts the social environment of the court. Although both the ghost and Dame Ragnelle have grotesque or deformed mouths, this does not hinder their ability to communicate. They both speak eloquently and effectively, although this may be in part due to their physical presence. Like the Loathly Lady, the physical appearance of Guinevere's mother does not reflect her internal reality. In an inversion of the Loathly Lady trope, her beautiful body

hides a fetid corrupt soul. Her body is a warning to her daughter and Gawain as representatives of the Round Table, that they must change their behavior to be more Christian and less excessive. This mirrors the conservative lesson in morality that is central to the Loathly Lady tales. Hahn points out that the encounter with the ghost proves that the supernatural and the natural world coincide and affect one another.⁵⁵ This supernatural element and the duality of her grotesque appearance combined with the lecture of chivalric behavior allows for the ghost to be included as a Loathly figure.

The encounter between the beautiful Guinevere and her mother's grotesque ghost evokes the imagery of the *transi* tomb while also conjuring a sense of doom in an otherwise vibrant text. She states:

Thus am I lyke to Lucefere: takis witnes by mee!
For al thi fressh foroure,
Muse on my mirrour;
For, king and emperour,
Thus dight shul ye be. (165-169)

The ghost specifically invites Guinevere and the reader to reflect on the inevitability of decay and death. Mortality, vanity, and the demonic are issues that are central to the *Ragnelle* texts as well. Gawain compares Ragnelle to a fiend: "Thowghe she were a fend;/ Thowghe she were as foulle as Belsabub" (344-45). Leo Spitzer also traces the name Ragnelle to the name of a demon in medieval literature.⁵⁶ Another similarity is the demonic imagery that the two share. Patricia Clare Ingham points out in her article that the horror of the ghost's physicality is conveyed in predominantly aural terms, with great focus being on the chattering of her jowls, jaw, and chin.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Hahn, "Introduction," np.

⁵⁶ Leo Spitzer, "Ragamuffin, Ragman, Rigmarole and Rogue," *Modern Language Notes* 62, no. 2 (February 1947): 85-93, 83-84.

⁵⁷ Patricia Clare Ingham, "Creative Creatures," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 63, no. 3 (2021): 233-55, 239.

The aurally generated fear stems from the ghost's mouth, which echoes the animalistic description of Dame Ragnelle's own mouth (551-552).

The author of *Awyntr's* gives considerable attention to physical details which are important plot devices in the narrative. For example, twelve of the thirteen lines of the poem's second stanza describe Guinevere's beautiful clothing and physical appearance (15-26). This highlights not only her role as queen, but also provides a background supporting the sins of which she is later accused, as well as a vibrant juxtaposition to the decaying ghost. As Zawacki points out, the physical appearance of the ghost is provided with a fourteen-line description that seems to be the opposite or inverse of her daughter's earlier description.⁵⁸ Her appearance is also a contradiction to her own appearance in life. This can be seen as an inversion of the two forms of the Loathly Lady, which seem to be equal and opposite in their ugliness and eventual beauty.

Bifurcation is a consistent theme in the Loathly Lady tales. The Loathly Lady is divided into two identities that are connected to the two different forms of her body. The text itself is also divided into two sections: before and after her transformation. The theme of bifurcation is prevalent in *The Awntyrs* which is divided into two episodes, which Zawacki sees as analogous to the medieval *transi* cadaver tombs.⁵⁹ The inclusion of the ghost and the concept of spectral disability show that the Gawain romances are haunted by disunity and the fear of death. It is easy to interpret the beautiful young Guinevere and the cadaverous ghost of her mother as a literary invocation of the *transi* or cadaver tombs, which contain twin-like images of the same individual in a whole and a decomposed state.⁶⁰ The theme of bifurcation that is analogous to the *transi*

⁵⁸ Zawacki "Dark," 90.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

tombs extends from the interaction between the ghost and her daughter through the rest of the poem. Zawacki believes that the themes of the *transi* tombs and bifurcation “highlight the interconnectedness of seemingly opposite states of life and death” which allows for the two seemingly disjointed episodes to be read as a congruent text.⁶¹ This juxtaposition can be extended to other seemingly opposite concepts that are explored within the text, such as the aristocracy and the gentry as well as the moral and the immoral.

Gawain, as is true to his character, exhibits a perfect model of moral behavior. He treats all people, including his Loathly bride, with the respect and courtesy that is expected of a knight of King Arthur’s court. His behavior and that of the rest of the court is an example of inclusivity versus exclusivity of a disabled person in a social setting. Nevertheless, Camelot is doomed. The behavior of the court towards Dame Ragnelle is not only a symptom of spectral disability on a social and physical level, but it also shows how the two *Ragnelle* texts have shifted away from issues of personal sovereignty to political sovereignty. The popularity of these texts, as well as their origins as texts for the urban elites, rather than the aristocracy, allow for the explorations of both fears and fantastical voyeurism where they see themselves as the Loathsome characters who frighten the sovereign aristocracy, which they ultimately wish to be accepted by.

III: Arthur’s Abuse of Sovereignty in the Gawain Tradition

Shifts in the concept of sovereignty are evident within the *Ragnelle* texts as well as an actual specter that warns of the inevitable end of Arthur’s sovereignty in the *Awntyrs off Arthur*. These shifts are the consequences of the bad behavior of those in power and of the subsequent didactic lessons that the protagonist has learned. In traditionally structured Loathly Lady tales, it

⁶¹ Zawacki “Dark,” 87.

has been the Loathly Lady's purpose to shape the chivalric knight. Although Florent was the closest to embodying the idealized qualities of chivalry, he still needed to learn about the role of sovereignty in relation to the sin of disobedience. The Knight in "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale'" was a rapist in great need of reform. In the *Ragnelle* texts, it is Arthur who needs instruction to become a better king. Not only do all three of the texts offer a critique of the limitations of political and geographic sovereignty, but they also address the corruption of chivalric culture. All the events of these texts are a direct result of Arthur's abuse of sovereignty. In both the *Ragnelle* texts and *The Awntyrs*, he redistributes other people's property without just cause. As the knightly protagonist, Gawain stands in contrast to Arthur, his fallible uncle and king. Gawain saves Arthur's sovereignty by continuously behaving within the idealized confines of chivalry.

The *Weddyng* begins with Gromer's complaint that Arthur had given his lands to Gawain unjustly, "withe greatt wrong" (59). The details of this "wrong" are not presented in the text, nor do we understand the established dynamic between Gromer and his king. Colleen Donnelly suggests that "Arthur's imprudence and questionable judgement in this piece" implies that he had emulated the nepotism of Edward III and Richard II and is therefore critical of those kings.⁶² This confrontation frames the narrative, which separates the *Ragnelle* texts from the other Loathly Lady tales. Unlike *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Ragnelle* texts can undoubtedly be classified as a Loathly Lady tale, but the didactic message of the text focuses on aristocratic feudal practices and the application of sovereignty. The personal issues of fealty and honoring one's word are still present and important within the narrative. However, the inclusion of Arthur and this conflict, as well as the bawdy tone and non-aristocratic audience, shows that

⁶² Colleen Donnelly, "Aristocratic Veneer and the Substance of Verbal Bonds in 'The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnelle' and 'Gamelyn,'" *Studies in Philology* 94, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 321–43, 325.

the text purposefully expresses a critique of the distribution of sovereignty within the upper levels of the feudal system. Scholars such as Donnelly, Laura Sumner, and Robert Shenk posit that while Arthur's behavior is not an example of idealized kingship, he is not necessarily a bad king. The flaw that he is supposed to overcome in these texts is "imprudence."⁶³ This youthfully indiscrete aspect of Arthur is reminiscent of his depiction in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As in that poem, Arthur is not the one who has learned a didactic lesson at the end of the text. Shenk argues that while Arthur learned to "never hunt on his own again," both he and Donnelly concur that there is no significant growth in Arthur's character.⁶⁴ As he is never able to learn from the didactic message presented by the Loathly figures, he continues to abuse his sovereignty and weaken Camelot.

One of the ways that Arthur abuses his sovereignty is through the appropriation and redistribution of lands that belong to lesser knights and giving them to his favorites, notably Gawain. The second half of *The Awntyrs* mirrors the land dispute that King Arthur faces in the *Ragnelle* texts. These two halves are often seen as unconnected but reading them in the light of the Loathly Lady tradition helps to make more sense of the connection between the two halves of the text. Like in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a strange knight enters the court and challenges King Arthur while they are at dinner. As usual, the challenge falls to Gawain. King Arthur had awarded Gawain the lands which had once belonged to the challenging knight, Sir Galeron of Galloway. His complaint is like that of Sir Gromer Somer Joure, as King Arthur has unjustly assumed control over his lands and given them to Gawain as a mark of his favor:

⁶³ Laura Sumner, "Introduction," in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell: Edited, with a Study of the Date and Dialect of the Poem and Its English Analogues* (Darby, PA: Darby Books, 1924), xiv-xvi, xxiv-xxxv. Cited by Donnelly, "Aristocratic," 325.

⁶⁴ Robert Shenk, "The Liberation of the 'Loathly Lady' of Medieval Romance," *Quidditas* 2 (n.d.): 69-77. Cited by Donnelly, "Aristocratic," 325.

Thou has wonen hem in werre with a wrange wile
And geven hem to Sir Gawayn - that my hert grylles.
But he shal wring his honde and warry the wyle,
Er he weld hem, ywys, agayn myn unwylles. (421-424)

Sir Galloway openly challenges Arthur's authority over his lands and the right of the king to redistribute his property without just cause or consent. In order to be recompensed for Arthur's abuse of power, Sir Galloway challenges Gawain to a fight to the death (411). This portion of the poem focuses on the physical skills required to be a successful knight and the mortal dangers of chivalry (456-619). The most important skill is Gawain's courtesy. He spares the life of his opponent when Guinevere and his opponent's lady intervene (625-637). Gawain restores the lands to the knight (677-689), thus restoring the balance of sovereignty in the kingdom.

The reoccurring unjustified assumption of less affluent knight's land and the redistribution of it to members of the aristocracy is indicative of class tensions. Class tensions have been present in each of the texts discussed in this thesis. Unlike the *Ragnelle* texts, the Irish material, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the works of Gower and Chaucer are written for higher levels of society, rather than a wider audience.⁶⁵ This is indicative of not only the cultural shift of these tales to a new set of authors and readers, but also their experience with the morality of sovereignty within a changing socio-political context. The inappropriate bodies and behaviors of these monstrous figures reflect the anxieties that the gentry experience in their desire to be assimilated into the ranks of the aristocracy. Within this context, the Loathly Lady is a didactic figure showing the benefit of this merger as they cause a positive return to more conservative moral and political behaviors of the aristocracy, which have become corrupt. It is through this practice of courtesy that the behavior and bodies of these figures transform and conform to their

⁶⁵ Steinberg, "Ugliness," 14.

new social roles while helping to reestablish the chivalric behavior that secures the sovereignty of King Arthur's court.

Although the texts are secular, rather than religious, the didactic nature of the Gawain romances is still self-evident. Helen Cooper points out that the fiction of the medieval period was always educational. These tales offered “a means of training the individual in the ethics and behaviors required in order for society... to function at its best.”⁶⁶ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner argues the romance genre as a free space for experimental ideas “that may function as a way to redirect and change the society it mirrors.”⁶⁷ By casting this social critique in the guise of a romance, Heng believes that “cultural discussion, [and] cultural transformation in the service of crisis and urgent contingency” can occur within this “safe space.”⁶⁸ The Gawain romances and the Loathly Lady tales use elements of the grotesque and spectral disability to poke fun at or critique “the pretensions and questionable integrity of the feudal system's aristocratic class.”⁶⁹ Steinberg, Forste-Grupp, Donnelly, and others agree that *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* are direct critiques of noble breeding and behavior that question the real-world success of the aristocracy through questioning the success of chivalry within fiction.⁷⁰ *The Awntyrs* can be easily added to this milieu as it also uses fictional elements to challenge failing courtly ideologies and behaviors.

⁶⁶ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance In Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 6. Cited by Steinberg “Ugliness,” 9.

⁶⁷ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 4. Cited by Steinberg, “Ugliness,” 9.

⁶⁸ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Cited by Steinberg, “Ugliness,” 9.

⁶⁹ Steinberg, “Ugliness,” 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

The failing ideology of Camelot and unsustainable nature of King Arthur's sovereignty is a primary focus of *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* (and the later ballad version, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*), *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. Each of these texts contains a loathly antagonist whose inhuman appearance challenge not only the idealized behavior of Sir Gawain, but vicariously Arthur's authority as king. The physical impairments of these characters— Dame Ragnelle, the ghost of Guinevere's mother, and the Carle himself— allow them to reveal the instability of Arthur's sovereignty by creating fear, uncertainty, or revulsion at their "otherness." They not only challenge Arthur's authority, but they also highlight the tenuous authority of courtly society during this period. These texts transform the concept of sovereignty from a divine right to a position that must be filled by the right man. Due to Arthur's continuous abuse of sovereignty and inability to learn from the didactic situation faced by Gawain, both he and Camelot are doomed.

Sovereignty, like knightly honor, only exists within the confines of a community. The Knights of the Round Table provide the contextual framework, i.e., the parameters and values, that determine who is fit to lead or be included. As Hahn points out, Gawain and the ghost in *The Awntyrs* seem to be the only ones who are aware that the structure and priorities of this society are heavily flawed and destined to end. Gawain, the ideal knight, questions the very nature of chivalry as it is a catalyst for violence:⁷¹

"How shal we fare," quod the freke, "that fonden to fight,
And thus defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes,
And riches over reymes withouten eny right,
Wynnen worshipp in werre thorgh wightnesse of hondes?" (Awntyrs 1261-64)

⁷¹ Hahn, "Introduction: Awntyrs," np.

The corruption of sovereignty has spread from Arthur to the other members of his court. We can see this clearly in an early episode of *The Carle of Carlisle*, when Sir Kay demands entrance to the Carle's castle in a manner that goes against the courteous behavior of chivalry. This is an abuse of power and a lack of chivalric *gentillesse*. In this text, it becomes even more evident that nobility is in behavior, not blood or social status. Instead, his demanding and entitled behavior evokes the reality of how a nobleman would behave. He is rude to the Carle and disrespectful of his property: "The hommyr away he wold have pold" (180). He insults his staff: "Thow jappyst, as I wene" (201). He even threatens his host: "The kyngus keyis woll we tane / And draw hem doun cleyn" (203-204). Unlike Gawain, Sir Kay is never intended to be an idealized figure. Steinberg explains that his behavior instead provides the negative tropes of the nobility so that Gawain's ideal behavior shines more brightly.⁷² The second portion of the *Awntyrs* also provides a critique of the excessive violence that the court praises within the context of their chivalric culture.⁷³ The didactic message of the ghost and Dame Ragnelle focuses on the unsustainable nature of these societal flaws. These two texts highlight Arthur's flaws, "pride, militaristic overexpansion, and neglect of the common people (310)."⁷⁴ This abuse of sovereignty is what ultimately leads to the downfall of Camelot. Yet it is arguably Gawain who is the only one who can understand the warnings and apply them. His humility allows him to absorb the didactic lessons of these texts and prosper in a way that Arthur is not able.

It is Gawain's exemplary behavior that restores King Arthur's sovereignty in each of these tales. The strife between Sir Gromer Somer Joure, Sir Galeron of Galloway, and the Carle

⁷² Steinberg, "Ugliness," 10.

⁷³ Chelsea S. Henson, "'Under a Holte so Hore': Noble Waste in the Awntyrs off Arthure," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 4 (2018): 3-24, 3.

⁷⁴ Henson, "Under," 3.

are not rooted in witchcraft, like in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The three men share the same dispute with the king: their forest-based lands have been subsumed into Arthur's domain. Taylor explains that the borders are always ripe with tensions, such as the simultaneous desire to reject and submit to authority.⁷⁵ This mirrors the anxieties felt by the urban-elite authors and readers of these tales. The paradox of the borderlands is yet another blurred line within the Gawain romances, where the boundaries between life and death and good and evil fluctuate. Taylor explains that Arthur's abuse of sovereignty allows him to attempt to regulate Otherness that are a threat to the security of the realm, when it is his fear of the loss of sovereignty.⁷⁶ Gawain offers a positive interpretation of aristocratic sovereignty that stands juxtaposed to Sir Kay's parody of abuse of noble power. Although the Carle, Sir Galloway, and Dame Ragnelle are examples of the gentry within texts written by and for that social class, they are not purely positive depictions. Both the Carle and Dame Ragnelle's behavior traverses the borders of appropriate conduct. The Carle is physically threatening to the knights (193-194; 520-522; 533). Dame Ragnelle, on the other hand, threatens the authority of aristocratic sovereignty. Their bodies and their behavior would have made medieval readers suspicious of their moral integrity. Though they may be suspicious of the Loathly figures, through their interactions, they learn that reality is far more complicated. People who are uncouth can be noble and vice versa.

The *Ragnelle* texts return to the Loathly Lady trope's origins as a commentary on the worthiness of a king-figure and the nature of sovereignty. While the relationship between the Irish sovereignty myth, the traditional Loathly Lady tales, and the Gawain stories is somewhat circumstantial, the themes of sovereignty and courtesy can provide a consistent link though the

⁷⁵ Joseph Taylor, "Arthurian Biopolitics: Sovereignty and Ecology in *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 59, no. 2 (2017): 182–208, 182.

⁷⁶ Taylor, "Arthurian," 184-185.

evolution of the Loathly Lady. These echo Forste-Grupp's reading of Aguirre's interpretation of sovereignty as the potential missing link that bridges the gap between the Irish material with Gower and Chaucer.⁷⁷ While the Irish material focuses on political sovereignty, the English romances instead focus on marital sovereignty. The later Gawain texts incorporate both forms of sovereignty. Ragnelle is a Loathly Lady who embodies both concepts of sovereignty. As Forste-Grupp explains in her article, Dame Ragnelle can be seen as bestowing sovereignty over Gromer's lands to Gawain when she provides the answer to his riddle.⁷⁸ His authority over these lands is then strengthened by their marriage.⁷⁹ As Forste-Grupp points out, the expansion of Arthur's lands is a central theme within Arthurian Romance, but it has a special significance within the *Ragnelle* texts, *The Carle*, and *The Awntyrs*. Arthur's sovereignty over his landholdings is achieved in three ways: conquest, expropriation, and "resumed seisin of the lands in absence of an obvious male heir."⁸⁰ The way the lands came into Arthur's authority is questionable.

There is no mention of Arthur obtaining the lands through battle. As Forste-Grupp explains, it is possible that Arthur has gone against common law (*ius commune*), which would prevent a king from redistributing property without just cause.⁸¹ If this were the case, these actions would cast him in the light of an unjust lord. This issue of political and geographic sovereignty draws a parallel between King Arthur and the historically villainous King John, who was forced to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 to protect the individual sovereignty of the land-

⁷⁷ Sheryl L Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell," *Studies in Philology* 99, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 105–22, 120. Referencing Manuel Aguirre, "The Riddle of Sovereignty," *The Modern Language Review* 88, no. 2 (April 1993): 273–82.

⁷⁸ Forste-Grupp, "Woman," 122.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

holding people and to curtail his own abuse of sovereignty as king. The removal of a freeman's land could only occur under due process of law. However, neither Gromer Somer Joure nor Arthur dispute the legal process by which he lost his lands to Arthur, but he still sees the king as corrupt and abusing his sovereignty.⁸² It is Gawain who can resolve the conflicts through his moralizing actions and integrity. His impeccable behavior highlights how badly Arthur and the other members of his court, notably Guinevere, Sir Kay, and Sir Baldwin, conduct themselves within the confines of chivalry.

Gawain provides the model of ideal behavior while Dame Ragnelle provides a didactic test that allows him to show the others how to treat the disabled, the elderly, and the Other even if it is unpleasant for themselves. This moral characteristic allows for behavior that makes a successful ruler. Arthur's abuse of his sovereignty as king through the wrongful appropriation of other knights' lands and giving them to Gawain shows his preference for his nephew over less fortunate members of his kingdom. Guinevere's adulterous behavior ultimately serves to distract Arthur at a key moment, which leads to the fall of Camelot and the loss of Arthur's sovereignty. This is reflective of the contemporary anxieties about royal authority and social mobility during this period. This didactic challenge provided by the loathly figures not only gives Gawain the chance to show how to behave perfectly as a knight, it also critiques the behavior of the king. On a more personal note, it also allows the reader to interpret the actions of the characters and to learn how to be a better person.

Conclusion

⁸² Forste-Grupp, "Woman," 111.

The English Loathly Lady tales contain heroes that are flawed but redeemable. As the tales spread from the aristocracy to a wider audience of the growing urban elite, the texts become much more critical of the characteristics that are necessary to be a good ruler and the behavior of those in the upper echelon of society. The Loathly Lady has evolved to become part of a conservative critique of the wider ruling class while expressing anxieties related to their developing role in a changing society. This critique echoes their self-perceptions about their own behaviors and appearance in this pre-established context. Within these later texts, not only does the Loathly figure become more grotesque, but King Arthur's right to sovereignty also becomes weakened and questionable. In comparison, Gawain emerges as an innately idealized chivalric figure. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* focused on Gawain's courteous behavior in an entirely aristocratic context. The focus now shifts from chivalric behavior to the more universal issues of spectral disability, death, and what it means to be noble in a more general sense.

Both the ghost and Dame Ragnelle offer the reader an encounter with their own sense of mortality as well as their own morality. Although Dame Ragnelle is not a specter of old age, she does die at the end of the text. Both the *Awntyrs* and the *Ragnelle* texts create an unsettling juxtaposition of life and death while simultaneously highlighting the interrelation of those two states. As Zawacki states, these incidents "[remind] us that *media vita in morte sumus*- 'in the midst of life we are in death.'"⁸³ This fear of death changes the hunter into the prey by allowing the ghost to disrupt the order of the natural world.⁸⁴ The early darkness and the terror of the animals helps to engender the valid fear of the ghost and her prophesy of a sudden death of their society. Spectral disability, be it in the shape of a ghost, a Loathly Lady, or a landscape, reflects

⁸³ Zawacki, "Dark," 88.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

the frailty of the body and the impermanence of human existence. Both Dame Ragnelle and the ghost draw attention to the omnipresent harsh realities of life and death in the medieval period.⁸⁵ Spectral disability haunts the medieval reality.

The Loathly figures, like abject fear of death brought on by spectral disability, cross class boundaries while simultaneously conveying the fear that these members of the gentry are so ill-suited to the ranks of nobility that they result to using the vocabulary of physical impairments and “otherness” to convey this anxiety. An examination of spectral disability allows for an understanding of the Loathly figure’s didactic warning within the context of the destructive power of moral corruption within Arthurian literature. Spectral disability, as embodied by Dame Ragnelle and the other Loathly characters, is a specific challenge to King Arthur and his court as the court as their reaction to her highlights the cracks in society. While Steinberg successfully argues that these monstrous figures are analogous to the members of the *nouveau riche* who are the authors and the audiences of these later tales,⁸⁶ the tensions between the rising gentry and the sovereignty of the aristocracy are equitable to social anxieties. Spectral disability is not limited to death and decay of a person but includes the morals and ideals of class structure. These texts not only show the gentry’s anxieties about how they will be perceived by the aristocracy as they try to join their ranks, but also their desire to return to a more chivalric ideal of behavior. While Dame Ragnelle and the Carle can show their fear of rejection by these higher echelons due to their physical appearances and behaviors, the ghost of Guinevere’s mother shows their fear for the destruction of the institution that they so long to be accepted by.

⁸⁵ Zawacki, “Dark,” 90.

⁸⁶ Steinberg, “Ugliness,” 14.

Having read these texts through the lens of disability studies, the reaction of the Arthurian community to Dame Ragnelle's life and death is a reflection of shared vulnerability. Dame Ragnelle provides an example of a disabled outsider that is in need of support. Within the social setting, both Gawain and Dame Ragnelle are vulnerable to the rise and fall of community opinion. Gawain treats Dame Ragnelle as a woman, specifically as a woman that will be his wife. He is aware of her grotesque physical appearance and behavior, but he treats her with respect. Similarly, he subjects himself to the authority of the Carle as his host. The Carle's frightening behavior, while not normative, is acceptable as he is the ruler of his household. The gendered differences between acceptable behavior recalls issues of personal and political sovereignty. It is possible for the Carle to challenge, behave badly, and ultimately be accepted as an equal. This is not possible for Dame Ragnelle because of her female gendered body. As a knight, there is the possibility that Gawain could lose his lands and favor at any time, becoming disenfranchised like Gromer Somer Joure and the others. Through his courtesy towards her, they can band together in mutual support of one another. The didactic message of these texts can be interpreted as one of shared vulnerability. All members of a society need to be respected and supported in order to function successfully. The texts are not an attack on the feudal system, but a reminder of the true nature of sovereignty and lordship. To an extent these attempt to remind the audience that moral values are necessary for power structures to function properly and required to successfully maintain sovereignty.

Conclusion

This thesis responds to a query about what constitutes a Loathly Lady tale and what role disability plays in relation to didacticism in medieval literature. By examining the diverse traditional and nontraditional Loathly Lady tales which evolve to reflect the changing nature of sovereignty and authority in the medieval English upper classes, it becomes clear that the pejorative reading of the Loathly Lady's hag form is the embodiment of medieval anxiety towards the aged, the impoverished, and the elderly. The appearance of *The Yellow Book of Lecan*, the *Confessio Amantis*, and *The Canterbury Tales* at the end of the fourteenth century coincides with a period of intense political turmoil in both England and Ireland. This culminated in the deposition of the English king, Richard II, in 1399 and the gradual recession of English sovereignty in Ireland, which by 1450 was limited to a small area around Dublin known as the Pale.¹ In the *Echtra*, the "Tale of Florent," and "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" a supernaturally impaired hideous old woman furthers the narrative. Her impaired body analogues the brutal nature of sovereignty while her wisdom and didactic message transforms the protagonist into a better version of himself as she guides him to a new stage of maturity. The impairments exhibited by her body deliberately trigger a revulsion in the protagonist and the reader which is rooted in the reality of the stigmatization suffered by those who experienced impairment or disfigurement, especially if they were lower class, elderly, or female. These tales, while not feminist by any stretch of the imagination, demonstrate that these marginalized figures have societal worth and value which must be embraced as a mark of personal nobility.

¹ Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ireland in 250 Episodes* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009), 180.

The Loathly Lady in these initial tales had a significant impact on the English literary imagination, given that similar loathly figures increasingly populated Arthurian romance as the fifteenth century progressed. The flourishing genre still relied on dramatically impaired or unusual bodies to didactically challenge the protagonist. The female Loathly Lady evolved from Gower's cursed princess-turned-peasant to the powerful but corrupt noblewoman-turned-sorceress Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although she is the sister of the young King Arthur, Morgan le Fay's evil magic has prematurely aged her body to the point that she is recognizable only as an anonymous old woman. While her body casts her as a Loathly Lady, her manipulative actions are evocative of the evil elderly granddame in "The Tale of Florent." Her body is not capable of testing Gawain's morality, so she enlists Lord and Lady Bertilak to act on her behalf. As the genre evolves to include non-traditional loathly figures like the bifurcated Morgan le Fay/ Lady Bertilak, the role of transformation becomes a moral or internal transformation rather than a physical bodily change. Disability, disfigurement, decay, and aging are static characteristics of the nonnormative bodies of the Loathly figures, such as the ghost of Guinevere's mother in the *Awntyrs off Arthur* and the titular Carle in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. The grotesque body of Dame Ragnelle is transformed into that of a beautiful young aristocrat, but her body is not able to maintain this state for long. In a narrative choice that breaks with the romantic precedent of "Happily Ever After," Dame Ragnelle dies a few years after her wedding to Gawain.

The Loathly Lady's disabled female body appears in the romance genre as a consistent critique of the behaviors of the aristocratic and bourgeois classes. The examples of women within this genre are limited to stereotypes. Many women are represented as distant ideal beauties who embody the able-bodied ideals of corporeal morality. While they nominally inspire

men to action, the aged Loathly Lady inspires change. Even when male authors represent themselves through a female voice, like the Wife of Bath, these female figures are represented as undermining or challenging the established and decaying social order: they dress up in aristocratic finery, they insert themselves into the upper echelons of society, they are sexually active, they are vocal, they are wise, and they often save the life of the protagonist. By garnering a reaction from the youthful chivalric court around them, they expose the delusion of unquestioned sovereignty held by a corrupt but handsome figure. While there is a gap between the lived experiences of disabled individuals and the literary interpretation of the Loathly Lady's impairments, the juxtaposition between her loathly and lovely bodies shows the contradiction between the romantic interpretation of disability as miraculously curable and the stigmatization experienced by the marginalized aged and impaired.

This study has uncovered the particulars of disability and its multifaceted connections to age, social class, and gender in the medieval Loathly Lady tales. By exposing the negative representation of aged and disfigured bodies in a chivalric warrior society, the rigorous standards of youth and beauty are equally exposed as unobtainable. These standards were upheld to the detriment of those whose physical bodies could not fit the prescribed aesthetic requirements due to age, status, or ability. The devalued representation of the Loathly Lady in her hag-form is the consequence of specific ideologies and social structures that were rooted in the concept of chivalry. Her appearance, and sometimes her actions, shows that this often-idealized society was hopelessly flawed. The courts' initial reactions to her inclusion as a member of their sect show the aristocracy's desire to exclude and eliminate those who could potentially disrupt the social hierarchy or restrict their sovereignty.

The medieval Loathly Lady tales and the supporting texts examined in this thesis demonstrate not just a fear of physical otherness, the destruction of established norms, disability, disfigurement, or death, but also a desire to be more inclusive. At first glance, these texts attempt to regulate and resolve the problem created by the presence of the Loathly Lady's ugly body within the confines of the beautiful young court of Camelot. Her contrasting appearance shows the cracks in the system and where the protagonist, and the reader, needs to improve. The body of the Loathly Lady is disruptive because it has been supernaturally transformed to mimic the impairments of age and decrepitude, and because, in this form, she refuses to be bound by traditional expectations, and continues to indulge her sexual desire. She is everything that a medieval woman in a medieval romance should not be. The paradox created by loathly figures in medieval romance is that at the time England was facing great political upheaval and social change, these disfigured and disabled bodies reflect the presence of vulnerability within a heavily militaristic period. The didactic nature of this vulnerability reveals the shortcomings in the fundamental principles of sovereignty and traditional ideals.

Reading the Irish sovereignty myth and the medieval English Loathly Lady tales from the perspective of disability studies not only proves that the texts are inherently didactic, but also that spectral disability is a continuously present phenomenon that transcends time, culture, and distance. The analysis in this thesis expands the meanings of present theories, such as the role of beauty in Irish kingship, John Gower's role as a disabled author, the Wife of Bath as a disabled narrative voice, and Dame Ragnelle as a stabilizing Loathly Lady. As this thesis is the first major application of spectral disability theory, multiple new ideas have emerged over the course of this study. Through the first application of disability studies to Irish saga, the deep relationship between disfigurement, disability, and sovereignty is analyzed for the first time. Reading "The

Wife of Bath's 'Prologue'" and her "Tale" in the light of gendered conduct literature not only creates a definitive connection between the two texts, but it also allows for the Loathly Lady to be convincingly read as the Wife of Bath's textual avatar. Spectral disability theory is one of multiple features that definitively link *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the Loathly Lady tradition. The analysis of Dame Ragnelle as one of several Loathly figures in the Gawain romances shows the continual presence of didacticism within the romances. These Loathly figures are linked not only through their non-normative bodies, but also through the stigma that they face. This stigmatization or reaction to their appearance in literature offers insight into the interpretation of disabled bodies and how they were treated within the medieval English courtly context. The consideration of the physical and social vulnerability that is shared between the Loathly Lady and the reader is the didactic response to this vulnerability that is shared between the reader and the protagonist.

The understanding of impairment and disability is malleable even within the field of disability studies. The application of disability theory to the humanities allows for studies such as this to widen the restricted and often pathologized interpretations of disability within the social and applied sciences. Tory Vandeventer Pearman builds on Simi Linton's work to explain that "despite the ubiquity of representations of disability in literature, art, and history, the humanities fields are all guilty of failing to critically consider it."² This study has turned away from the pathological interpretation of the Loathly Lady as an ugly hag and instead look at her experience with disability as a social production. Studying the representation of her impairment allows for a critical re-viewing of "the vast realm of meaning-making that occurs in metaphoric and symbolic

² Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 151.

uses of disability. These devices need to be analyzed in an array of cultural products to understand their meanings and their functions, and to subvert their power.”³ While scholars such as Pearman, Encarnación Juárez-Almendros, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and others have begun to work with disability as a metaphorical and symbolic manifestation in literature, the significance of these manifestations is regulated by the historical period, genre, and culture in which the textual depiction originates.

Throughout this project, I have taken up Pearman’s methodology to “claim disability” within a medieval literary context.⁴ By looking at the Loathly Lady as a disabled figure, this thesis fills a number of gaps in the existing scholarship. The Loathly Lady is a representation of gendered and aged disability that exposes social anxieties about bodily differences, ageing, disfigurement, and social mobility. The power of the Loathly Lady as this representation of spectral disability helps to convey the cultural production of disability within the medieval English environment. I have contextualized the Loathly Lady’s representation of disability within the popular and wide-ranging romance genre. This allows for the Loathly Lady’s production of disability to occur within the ruling classes, thus giving greater significance to the transformation of sovereignty within the texts. In each of the tales, the Loathly Lady’s experience with disability, class, and gender is the product of a medieval male-authored interpretation in an upper-class text for an increasingly bourgeois audience. As these texts evoke conduct literature while trying to educate the reader under the guise of entertainment, the author uses the Loathly Lady’s body as both a lesson and a reward. These secular texts build upon the anxieties and stigmatization set down by religious and medical discourses, which were also written by well-

³ Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 125. cited by Pearman, *Women*, 151.

⁴ Pearman, *Women*, 151.

educated men. The Loathly Lady's physical transformation is not just a reward for the protagonist and a lesson for the reader, it reflects the curative medical perception of impairments which is still present and problematic to this day.

While the Loathly Lady has been the primary topic of this thesis, the heart of this project transformed into didactic nature of the motif results in the hero and his internal journey as influenced by the Loathly Lady. In looking at the *Echtra* and *The Saga of Fergus mac Leti*, the Irish sovereignty goddess acts as a prophetic counselor to set down the physical and moral characteristics required of a man who wishes to hold sovereignty, be it in a political or corporeal form. Having the Irish material as a starting point for the thesis not only allows for an unprecedented analysis of disability in Irish saga, it follows the accepted interpretation of the Irish myth as a source for the English Loathly Lady motif. Because the manuscripts containing the version of the *Echtra* that forms the basis of the standard edition in both Middle Irish and English are contemporary to both Gower and Chaucer's Loathly Lady tales, this version of the story is more properly understood as an analogue rather than a source of the English tradition. By acknowledging this, it becomes clear that the Irish and English were simultaneously preoccupied with sovereignty but contextualized in very different ways. While Passmore investigates the role of the Loathly Lady as a prophetic counselor to the young future king, the analysis of the king's body as an embodiment of the body politic shows the symbiotic relationship between disability and sovereignty. This is a long-established legal practice in Ireland, as shown in *The Saga of Fergus mac Leti*. As Passmore points out, "Merely being the "true king" is not all that it takes."⁵ A good king must follow the guidelines set down by those who give him sovereignty.

⁵ S. Elizabeth Passmore, "Introduction," in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, eds. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), xiii-xix, xiv.

The theme of advice is central to the didactic message which runs through the English Loathly Lady tradition. While R. F. Yeager establishes the political advice in “The Tale of Florent,” which was written by a presumably aged and disabled Gower, both the advice and the concept of sovereignty take on an element of personal morality rather than strictly political connotations. Issues of age and disability are responsible for the intentionally crafted shock at the end of Book VIII of the *Confessio Amantis*, where Amans, the would-be lover, is revealed to be an old man, John Gower. Although Gower was middle-aged when he wrote the *Confessio Amantis*, his appropriation of impairments associated with the elderly allowed him to distance himself from the complications that could arise by offering presumably unsolicited advice on sovereignty to a soon-to-be deposed king and then his shakily established successor. By casting himself as a wise but infirm old man, not only does Gower utilize the stereotypes of the Ages of Man *topos* which justify his giving of advice, he also masks the political critique that is present in the text. While Yeager sees the “Tale of Florent” as a distinctively political fairytale which encourages England’s aristocracy to support their sovereign, the contemporaneous Irish sovereignty myth encourages political support and justifies the right of the O’Neill family to assume sovereignty over the fractured Ireland.

While it is impossible to know if Gower and Chaucer had any knowledge of the Irish sovereignty myth, and it is fairly certain that they had no connection to the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, the relationship between willful obedience, sovereignty, and disability continues throughout the Loathly Lady tradition. Conduct literature offers social guidelines that are reminiscent of the *gessi* in early Irish saga, these texts offer both general and specific social restrictions as applied to either a man or a woman of a certain standing. They must submit to these regulations to function successfully within the changing medieval English society. As a parody of female

conduct literature, the Wife of Bath comically shows the impossibility of following the heavily restrictive rules that were set down for women by male authors. Like Gower/ Amans in the *Confessio Amantis*, the Wife of Bath is a disabled narrator and an inappropriate lover. As the Wife of Bath's avatar, the Loathly Lady in her Tale is also an inappropriate lover. In a parody of male conduct literature, the rapist Knight must conform to the standards of chivalry and become a better person through the guidance of the Loathly Lady. As conduct literature was divided by gender and sometimes published in unison, a well-known example being *How the Good Wiff Taughte Hir Doughtir* and *How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne*, the often considered fractious "Wife of Bath's 'Prologue'" and her "Tale" are definitively linked through Chaucer's deliberate inclusion of parodic elements, styles, and themes taken from gendered conduct literature.

Given that Roberta L. Kreuger reads romances such as *Percival* as examples of male conduct literature, a didactic message can be found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Numerous thematic elements connect the text to the Loathly Lady tradition and Irish material, especially the aged and impaired body of Morgan le Fay. Although Gawain is the closest thing possible to a perfect chivalric knight, he has flaws which he must learn to overcome. Spectral disability is a driving force in the text; it is both as an existential concept and it is embodied by the hag-like Morgan le Fay. Her anonymity is not due to magic, but to Gawain's ageism. Although the didactic message in this text is about forgiving oneself and accepting that it is impossible to reach all the standards set down by chivalry or in conduct literature, Gawain and the reader also learn to see that elderly members of society are worthy of notice. Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak are the first example of a bifurcated Loathly Lady, which is also seen in another Gawain romance, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*.

Theories of social order and disorder are central to the Loathly Lady motif. While Mary Leech explores the contradictory nature of Arthurian idealism in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* to analyze the shaky state of political sovereignty, the chaos that is initially caused by Dame Ragnelle is restorative. While she believes that Dame Ragnelle must die because she has shown the Arthurian court its flaws and is now a problematic reminder for King Arthur, Dame Ragnelle is not the only Loathly figure show Arthur's fallibility as a sovereign in the Gawain romances. Dame Ragnelle, the Carle of Carlisle, and the ghost of Guinevere's mother all initially cause social disruption through their bad behavior and their nonnormative bodies. The ghost and her daughter not only evoke the theme of motherly advice found in female conduct literature, she and her daughter are another example of a bifurcated Loathly Lady. After the didactic message has been conveyed by the disruptive Loathly figures, their chaotic agency is neutralized. Order is temporarily restored to the doomed kingdom of Camelot.

There are several variants of the Loathly Lady which were not discussed in this thesis as they did not thematically follow the pattern of the *Echtra* and the English tradition or because they fall outside of the geographic and temporal scope of this project. In Irish saga, there is one other notable myth that appears in the Fenian Cycle, the third of the four main groupings of early Irish literature which spans multiple manuscripts containing poetry and prose which were composed between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. These manuscripts include the *Book of Glendalough* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 502), the *Book of Leinster* (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339), and the *Yellow Book of Lecan* (Dublin, Trinity College MS 1318). The Fenian cycle is traditionally set in the second to fourth centuries CE. This is a generic name

given to the body of texts focusing on the adventures of the Fenian warriors.⁶ While this tale does involve the physical transformation of an old woman after she is sexually satisfied by a young warrior, there is no connotation of sovereignty. There is little similarity between the narratives. This text shows the bad things that happen when a famous warrior, Diarmuid Ua Duibhne, is not worthy of the Loathly Lady's love.⁷ This is a comparatively modern Irish version, as it is part of the seventeenth century *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne). While this anonymous composite text is written in Modern Irish, elements of the tales can be dated back to the tenth century and it is still considered a part of the Fenian Cycle.⁸ Loathly Lady figures appear as a counselor or quest-bringer in other romances such as Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (c.1190), Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (c. 1200), and the Welsh text *Peredur son of Efwrawg*, which was written in the twelfth or thirteenth century. A Loathly Lady figure also appears in the Old Norse saga *Hrólfs saga kraka* (the Saga of King Rolf Kraki) (c. 1400), which relays semi-historic events set in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁹ The Old Norse version is similar to the one found in the Fenian Cycle rather than the *Echtra* or the English tradition.

⁶ Standish James O'Grady, trans., "Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada Agus Ghráinne = The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne: O'Grady, Standish, 1846-1928," Internet Archive, 1881,

<https://archive.org/details/truigheachtdhi02ograuft/page/vi/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁷ Gienna Matson and Jeremy Roberts, *Celtic Mythology A to Z* (New York, NY: Chelsea House, 2010), 75.

⁸ James Mackillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 410-411.

⁹ "Hrólfs Saga Kraka OK Kappa Hans," *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, accessed October 9, 2023,

http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Hr%C3%B3lfs_saga_kraka_ok_kappa_hans.

Lady Charlotte Elizabeth Guest, trans., "Peredur the Son of Efwrawc," *Peredur the Son of Efwrawc* | Robbins Library Digital Projects, accessed October 9, 2023, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/guest-peredur>.

Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, ed. Nigel Bryant (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2006).

As Mary Edwards Shaner explains at length, the Loathly Lady motif fell out of fashion for some time after the “King Henry,” Child Ballad 32, Round 3967.¹⁰ This form of the tale is most like the version found in the *Hrólfs saga kraka* and a Scottish folktale “The Daughter of King Under-waves.”¹¹ Mrs. Anna Brown of Fifeshire, Scotland is credited as the original singer; the ballad was collected between 1792-1794.¹² “The Marriage of Sir Gawain,” Child Ballad 31 is a fragmented retelling of *The Weddyng of Syr Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* which was written for professional minstrels.¹³ The ballad praises Gawain for his treatment of the Loathly Lady, who transforms when he allows her to choose her own form. The Loathly Lady seems to have slept for over a century before she returned to the stage in *Cathleen ní Houlihan*, a one-act play by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory (1902). The Loathly Lady is a representation of Caitlín Ní Uallacháin, who is not only a mythical figure but also a symbol of Irish sovereignty and nationalism in Irish art and literature. As the Sean-Bhean Bhocht (poor old woman), she encourages young Irish men to sacrifice themselves for Irish independence from England. In the play, she transforms into a queenly young woman after a young man agrees to fight for Ireland on his wedding day.¹⁴

The English Loathly Lady has gone on to have a very active afterlife in the media of film, particularly in didactic children’s movies. The Loathly Lady’s rise to stardom began in

¹⁰ Mary Edwards Shaner, “A Jungian Approach to the Ballad ‘King Henry,’” essay, in *The English “Loathly Lady” Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 186–98, 186.

¹¹ Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (London: Dover, 1965), 297.

¹² Ralph Vaughan Williams, ed., “King Henry [Traditional Ballad Index Entry],” The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, accessed October 4, 2023, <https://www.vwml.org/search?q=roudu%203967&is=1>.

¹³ Francis James Child, ed., “Ballad 31: The Marriage of Sir Gawain,” *The Child Ballads: 31. The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, accessed October 4, 2023, <https://sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/child/ch031.htm>.

¹⁴ William Butler Yeats, *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 211-220.

1937 with Walt Disney's first full-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.¹⁵ In this re-telling of a classic fairytale, the Loathly Lady trope is inverted: the Evil Queen transforms herself into an ugly hag so that she may poison her beautiful stepdaughter. Disney animators revisited the Loathly Lady in another retelling of another classic fairytale in the 1991 animated film *Beauty and the Beast*.¹⁶ A drastic uptick in Loathly Lady movies appeared during the early 2000's. DreamWork's *Shrek*, which had been in stages of production since 1991 as the first of a six-movie franchise, was released in 2001.¹⁷ The Japanese movie *ハウルの動く城*, or *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) from Studio Ghibli shows the global implications of the Loathly Lady trope, as this was based on a 1986 British novel of the same name by Diana Wynne Jones.¹⁸ Live action movies also used the motif. *Nanny McPhee* (2005), *Penelope* (2006), and *Nanny McPhee Returns* (2010) all contain didactic lessons in which internal transformation is reflected in the exterior transformation of the Loathly Lady.¹⁹ The first film in Disney's live action renaissance

¹⁵ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, directed by David Hand (Walt Disney Productions, 1937), https://www.amazon.com/Snow-White-Seven-Dwarfs-Theatrical/dp/B01434DFYG/ref=sr_1_1?crd=TN8YMR63U252&keywords=snow+white+and+the+seven+dwarfs&qid=1698239959&s=instant-video&prefix=snow+white%2Cinstant-video%2C203&sr=1-1.

¹⁶ *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1991), https://www.amazon.com/Beauty-Beast-Theatrical-Version-Paige/dp/B01HE0A904/ref=sr_1_1?crd=EK4T4H7BCNZU&keywords=beauty+and+the+beast+movie&qid=1698240202&s=instant-video&prefix=beauty+and%2Cinstant-video%2C191&sr=1-1.

¹⁷ *Shrek*, directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson (Dreamworks, 2001), https://www.amazon.com/Shrek-Mike-Myers/dp/B079HTHCV2/ref=sr_1_3?crd=39F42NG9NHVTS&keywords=shrek&qid=1698239584&prefix=shrek%2Caps%2C233&sr=8-3.

¹⁸ *Howl's Moving Castle*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli, 2004), https://www.amazon.com/Howls-Moving-Castle-English-Language/dp/B081PLNG3K/ref=sr_1_1?crd=3MVMXR6YSW2OI&keywords=howl%27s+moving+castle+prime+video&qid=1698240255&s=instant-video&prefix=howls%2Cinstant-video%2C162&sr=1-1.

¹⁹ *Nanny McPhee*, directed by Kirk Jones (Universal Pictures, 2005), https://www.amazon.com/Nanny-McPhee-Emma-Thompson/dp/B009CGHFBK/ref=sr_1_1?crd=3BTXM8XPHHBZJ&keywords=nanny+mcPhee&qid=1698240413&s=instant-video&prefix=nanny+%2Cinstant-video%2C204&sr=1-1.

Penelope, directed by Mark Palansky (Momentum Pictures, 2006), https://www.amazon.com/Penelope-Richard-Grant/dp/B00942Y35S/ref=sr_1_1?crd=L9FPABV70257&keywords=penelope&qid=1698240564&s=instant-video&prefix=penel%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

included a Loathly Lady as the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* (2015).²⁰ She also appeared in the live action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017).²¹ As with the increase of Loathly Ladies and Loathly figures at the turbulent end of the fourteenth century in England, these movies reflect the anxiety surrounding the global challenge to political sovereignty and personal identity. Of these movies, three animated films particularly speak to the issues of disability, spectral disability, ageism, and the inappropriate lover. These three are *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Shrek* (2001), and *ハウルの動く城*, or *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). These movies are not just lifelong personal favorites; they each show the wider connotations of sovereignty over the bodies of those who do not fit into standard norms of beauty and behavior. These three speak to the ongoing intersection between disability and sovereignty as a didactic tool, as well as questioning the significance of internal and external beauty as indicative of one's worth.

Beauty and the Beast (1991) focuses on issues of Otherness and inclusion. The beginning of the movie not only contains one of the most precise examples of a traditional Loathly Lady, but it also follows the tradition of the Loathly Lady tales as a coming-of-age narrative for both Belle and the Beast. The eponymous Beast is a Loathly Lord and an inappropriate lover. He is a young prince who has been transformed by the Loathly Lady into a monstrous humanoid beast as a punishment for being selfish and unkind. While he can only return to his human form once he

Nanny McPhee Returns, directed by Susana White (Universal Pictures, 2010), https://www.amazon.com/Nanny-McPhee>Returns-Emma-Thompson/dp/B0048KUAJY/ref=sr_1_1?crd=2RCLKF6J8969S&keywords=nanny+mcphoe+returns&qid=1698240684&s=instant-video&prefix=nanny+mc%2Cinstant-video%2C201&sr=1-1.

²⁰ *Cinderella*, directed by Kenneth Branagh (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015), https://www.amazon.com/Cinderella-Theatrical-Cate-Blanchett/dp/B010VAG5WA/ref=sr_1_2?crd=1S4K3DHICL9PG&keywords=cinderella&qid=1698240827&s=instant-video&prefix=cinderella%2Cinstant-video%2C168&sr=1-2.

²¹ *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Bill Condon (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017), https://www.amazon.com/Beauty-Beast-UHD-Emma-Watson/dp/B084Z5J96P/ref=sr_1_2?crd=1DKP8FA1301FA&keywords=beauty+and+the+beast+movie&qid=1698240994&s=instant-video&prefix=beauty%2Cinstant-video%2C222&sr=1-2.

learns to love and be loved in return, the beautiful Belle is equally tested. Her morals and her identity are challenged and developed via her interactions with the Loathly Lord, the Beast. Like Gawain and the Carle in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, her stay in the enchanted castle includes social tests which ultimately restore the Loathly Lord. The Beast eventually learns to behave like a gentleman and develop empathy, behavior that is required of a future king. Although he is aware that he is an inappropriate lover for Belle, he is inspired to become a better person through his love for her. Simultaneously, Belle learns to be brave. She rejects societal prejudices as she fights for what she believes is morally right. While the didactic message of this movie is ultimately about beauty stemming from compassion for oneself and others, it is equally about being true to oneself while being willing to grow as a person.

Shrek (2001) deals with issues of political and personal sovereignty, as well as the definition of beauty. Shrek, the titular misanthropic ogre, can be read as a literary descendant of Dame Ragnelle. Lord Farquaad, the corrupt narcissistic ruler of a nearby medieval kingdom, assumed ownership over Shrek's swamp. This is reminiscent of the land disputes found in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* as well as *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. To obtain the deed, Shrek must rescue the beautiful Princess Fiona for him. Shrek is another inappropriate lover. Fiona is cursed to be beautiful during the day and an ogress at night; she will ultimately take her true love's form. This is like the Loathly Lady in "The Wife of Bath's 'Tale,'" who offers to be one way by day and one by night. As the only child and heir to her parents' kingdom of Far Far Away, this is renescent of the *gessi* in the Irish sovereignty texts, as having an ogre rule is societal taboo. While this movie contains problematic depictions of disability and impairment, it also teaches about emotional growth and learning to love one's body. As in *Beauty*

and the Beast, the didactic message largely focuses on being true to oneself in the face of societal rejection.

The Loathly Lady is not only the main protagonist of *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), but she is also predominantly in her Loathly form. The journey of Sophie, a young girl who is cursed by the jealous Witch of the Waste to look and feel like an old woman, is intensely feminist. While the didactic message is still rooted in the importance of compassion and empathy, this movie highlights the dangerous encroachment of political sovereignty over personal sovereignty at the hand of corrupt rulers during a time of war. This film contains multiple depictions of female disability, ageing, and impairment. It also contains a manipulative old woman in a dangerous position of power, as seen in the "Tale of Florent" and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sophie's transformation is gradual and rooted in the development of her self-love rather than the romantic love between her and Howl. Their romantic relationship develops even though he is a young man, and she appears to be an old woman, thus returning to the theme of the inappropriate lover. Both Howl and Turniphead, a cursed scarecrow, are examples of Loathly Lords. The Witch of the Waste is another inverted Loathly Lady, who is restored to and mostly redeemed in her true elderly age. The didactic message of this movie is stated by Turniphead after his transformation: "one thing you can count on is that hearts change." The didactic message of each of these three movies emphasizes that moral and emotional change are more important than physical transformation.

This discussion of the modern incarnations of the Loathly Lady demonstrates that the story is of continuing relevance, and that the framework provided in this thesis is flexible enough to not only provide new insight into the older versions of the story, but also these new ones. Through the analysis of the original corpus of the Loathly Lady tales as well as the trope in

Arthurian literature more broadly, it is easy to see a range of modern sources that have been influenced by the Loathly Lady motif. The application of disability studies and spectral disability theory to these examples proves that the didactic message and the relationship between disability, ageism, and sovereignty continues from medieval period into the present day. By establishing the intrinsic relationship between disability and sovereignty in Irish saga, a fruitful new branch of scholarship can develop. This first application of spectral disability shows that the theory provides great insight into the fears and prejudices that are otherwise under-examined as motivational factors in medieval narratives. The creation of a monograph study on the Loathly Lady has allowed for a concise and intimate platform that allows for the analysis of disability and ageism as they develop with the trope. Reading the Loathly Lady tales in light of spectral disability theory allows for further analysis of the relationship between disability studies and medieval literature.

Even within the context of an Irish sovereignty myth or an animated film, the Loathly figure is never quite divorced from the cultural or social values surrounding their creation. To some extent, the didactic message of the Loathly figure represents a deliberately crafted expression of morality that is exhibited by the public persona of the “author,” whether that is John Gower, the Wife of Bath, or the Disney corporation. What is certain is that the Loathly Lady and her didactic message will continue in popular consciousness. This is in part because the didactic message of the Loathly Lady tales stems from a place of compassion. By having empathy for an outsider, the protagonist and the reader learn that the value of an individual is not based on a social norm, such as class, age, wealth, or beauty. Each of these tales highlights positive internal growth and personal change resulting from interacting with the Loathly figure, even if the experience was initially frightening or uncomfortable. This reflects the fact that

people who experience disability, disfigurement, and impairment are valuable members of society who are worthy of respect, acknowledgement, and inclusion. It is not beauty that is indicative of goodness, but behavior. Although these Loathly figures initially embody the fear of ageing or spark revulsion in a beauty-focused environment, their influence is not “skin deep.” Their non-normative bodies and behavior do not just challenge the protagonist or advance the plot. They also help the reader, who must learn how to treat others and change internally for the better. Whether this principle is interpreted as a religious or a social standard, it is ultimately a personal one. Empathy allows one to be sovereign over one’s destiny. It guides the making of good choices which allows us to reach our full potential. This sovereignty is a beautiful thing, but it is seldom gained “cen chatha ocus cen chongala,” (without battles or conflicts).²² By learning from protagonists and internalizing the Loathly Lady’s message, we are transformed into better and more accepting people who can make a difference with the sovereignty that we are given.

²² Whitley Stokes, trans., “The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón,” *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903): 190–203, 203.

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