

Into the Queen's Court, Granny:
Crones and Coalitional Possibilities in
The Wife of Bath's Tale

by Piper Farmer



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B R Y N M A W R C O L L E G E

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a knight is assigned by the queen of King Arthur's court to figure out 'what thyng wommen loven moost' as penance for a rape he perpetrates. The women of the court are united in presenting this opportunity for restorative justice, despite its ultimate failure in applying any real consequences to the rapist/knight. The knight, however, wanders to an otherworld, where he finds an 'olde wife' that creates new possibilities for justice in the tale. Taking on motif of the loathly lady, her presence in the court reopens imaginative possibilities for collective action; the body of the crone becomes central to the texts' ability to imagine justice and create possibilities for community, even if that justice remains ambivalent.

Drawing on Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Space Crone' and Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid*, this article analyses these imaginative possibilities across critical traditions, reading the old woman of *the Wife of Bath's Tale* as a site of speculation that engenders mutual aid-like coalitions within the court's negotiation. The loathly lady herself, despite the ineffectiveness of feminist justice in the tale, functions as a palimpsest of those possibilities for coalition even in her disappearance. More broadly, I read the Wife of Bath's old woman not only as a site of speculative possibilities for community within her text, but also outside of it in the genealogy of Chaucer criticism: the friction between Le Guin and the Wife of Bath's parables, along with their shared imaginative possibilities, might function as a space to illuminate relationships and form coalitions across the tale's readings.

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Within *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a group of courtly women pursue restorative justice for a rape committed by a 'lustly bachelor' knight to questionable efficacy—all prior to the arrival of an old woman, who fundamentally alters the narrative (WBT 883). This crone is not a creature of the court. She belongs to the 'forest syde'; her body is positioned on the margins, indeterminate and uncategorizable to the knights of the tale and, to some extent, the reader (WBT 990). She is a loathly lady—a 'shapeshifting hag [who] becomes beautiful once she gets her own way'—and as such is a motif that 'belongs in the configuration of goddesses who are transversers of stereotype...who expand the meaning of femininity' beyond the usual categories of wife, maiden, and widow in medieval society (Carter 329, 330).¹ Functioning as a literary trope, the loathly lady has been identified as a stock character across medieval texts, such as Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Dame Ragnell in 'The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.' The loathly lady thus has a doubled position. Like the Wife of Bath herself, as a postmenopausal woman, she maintains a unique position of control over her own assets, sovereignty, and role in society; she simultaneously serves as a near-mythic figure (see Turner 2023). The loathly lady as a motif has been imbued with ecofeminist associations for this mythic role: she 'is a woman of the earth, a being whose closeness to her surroundings imbues her with clout, and this mystic goddess must train men... to submit to women's sovereignty and to control the land... [she] springs from an environmental element' (Kordecki 24). Her position is both ambivalent, mythic, and yet a part of a folk tradition (see Passmore and Carter, *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales*).

Even as a loathly lady, there are no boxes the crone fits neatly; she replaces a group of many other women and is both multiple and one. Drawing on Ursula K. Le Guin's 1976 essay 'The Space Crone' as both a heuristic for understanding the medieval old woman and as a lens with which to read a potential futurity in her body, I read the Wife of Bath's loathly lady as a crone that has experienced what Ursula K. Le Guin refers to as Change, enabling her to become a site of imaginative possibilities within the tale's narrative. This essay thus examines this old crone not merely as loathly lady or old woman, but instead as Le Guin's 'space crone' and a site for political

movement, figuring her as a character who invites possibility and engenders mutual aid. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in *the Canterbury Tales* uses these speculative possibilities presented by the body of the crone as a mode to facilitate a vision of coalition-building and mutual aid across diverse groups, both those within the text, and those that may be available across the history of *The Wife of Bath's Tale's* critique.

At the beginning of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a knight rapes a young maiden who is walking alone. She incites a criminal trial for his actions by raising a 'clamour,' and the knight is condemned to death by the court (889). The trial, however, is taken over by the 'queene and other ladyes mo' who 'preyeden the kyng of grace' to give the knight an alternative punishment (WBT 894-5). They determine that he must seek out 'what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren,' or lose his head (905). The queen and her diverse group of ladies, divided into categories—'lige lady' (the Queen), maidens, wives, and widows—are the centre of the description of the court (1037).² Later in the text, the Wife of Bath enumerates the woman by these classifications ('Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe... / The queene herself...') before emphasizing their unity, saying they were 'assembled been' despite these disparate categorizations (1026-1029). Rather than highlighting any particular category of woman, the text emphasizes the procedural shift from social difference to assemblage and community. The negotiation between the women and the King, while a feudal event paralleled across *the Canterbury Tales*, takes particular care to emphasize the women's actions as a coalition.³ They coordinate their efforts to convince the King to allow them to enact their own version of justice, a 'community response to rape by the specific population that has been wronged' (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 6; WBT 1037, 1043-4). These collective actions might be read akin to mutual aid, described by Dean Spade as 'collective coordination to meet each other's needs' (Spade 7).

Mutual aid acts as a lens with which to understand the way in which coalition building occurs in this negotiation, as a facet of the women's legal request. The trial of the knight, once directed by the women of the tale, 'address[es] harm and violence...called community accountability' or 'transformative justice' and aims to

give the survivor support to heal, give the harm-doer what they need to stop the behaviour, and assess how community norms can change' (Spade 57). This aid has both benefits and pitfalls, including the possibility that mutual aid work is subject to 'co-optation' by various structures of power, which may render the mutual aid ineffective or harmful (Spade 50). Spade notes that 'there is nothing new about mutual aid' and indeed a form of it appears here. The text focuses not only on not only the women as a bargaining unit but also the women as a coalition, underpinning a mode of mutual support throughout *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (Spade 7). In the opening to the text, the women succeed at providing a seemingly restorative application of justice—the knight is condemned by their collective wishes—which is prompted by their ability to perform a 'community response' (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 6). The effectiveness of this justice, however, is immediately called into question by the rest of the tale.

The knight is full of woe upon hearing his fate, and the narrative lends space to his sadness, emphasising how 'sorwefully he siketh' without holding him to emotional account or asking him to display guilt. His affective displays of annoyance and personal injury place him in what Carissa Harris calls the role of the 'victim-survivor' rather than that of a rapist (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 7; WBT 913). He is rewarded for these affective displays and, at the conclusion of the story, does not suffer. He goes on to have a 'herte bathed in a bath of blisse' and sovereignty over the body of his wife, in a parallel to his original crime, at the end of the tale (1253). In addition to the forgiveness the tale levies on the knight, the effectiveness of the coalition of women's proposed justice is also called into question by the complete disappearance of the maiden from the narrative, and by the ambiguity of whether the knight actually learns anything—it is the old woman who eventually teaches him what the queen decreed he should learn by himself, 'what women want most'—and whether he has internalized the meaning of his punishment is unknown (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 7). By calling into question the validity of the queen's remedy and disappearing the victim from the narrative, the coalition fails to support the specific survivor who was harmed, and whether the knight's capacity for harm has been reduced is not addressed. Their mutual aid is, at best, questionable. The

court of ladies has effectively been co-opted by the ruling structure of the court to protect a male criminal and his status as a knight amidst structures of 'felawe masculinity,' which rewards opportunities for men to verbalize women's desires: the knight's task to speak for women and declare what they desire (see Harris, 'Felawe Masculinity'). The queen, the mouthpiece of their efforts, is herself co-opted entirely, a result that breaks the coalition of women by making her act as King rather than Queen; Crane argues that a 'woman's status in this system [of medieval gender] is closer to that of her man than to that of women and men at other strata in the system,' and the Queen's ineffectiveness effectively subsumes her into the King's masculinity (Crane 98). She is also drawn into the broader rape culture of the tale, and the assemblage of women is made a kind of jape for the pilgrims with Alisoun; felawe masculinity appears even despite the lack of masculine characters in the tale.

The loathly lady, upon entering the tale, provides a different solution. Le Guin defines the crone—a postmenopausal woman—as 'pregnant with herself,' a person who has 'experienced, accepted, and enacted the entire human condition—the essential quality of which is Change' (Le Guin 5-6).⁴ By experiencing the transition from what Le Guin refers to as a 'rite of passage'—from virgin to mature woman—and the transition of the Second Change into an old woman, a 'third and new condition,' the crone bears herself in full (Le Guin 3-4). Her body becomes a site of multiplicities of knowledge and a point of connection to speculative possibilities. Le Guin—envisioning a world in which an alien spaceship asks to take alone an 'exemplary person' and an ambassador of humanity with them—writes that she would pick an 'old woman, over sixty...[with] a stock of sense, wit, patience, and experiential shrewdness' (Le Guin 4-6). She writes that the old woman:

knows, though she won't admit it, that Dr. Kissinger has not gone and will not go where she has gone, that the scientists and the shamans have not done what she has done. Into the space ship, Granny. (Le Guin 4-6)

Le Guin's concept of the space crone acts as an envoy to a kind of otherworld; she is a woman who is mortally bound and has confronted death, yet also represents an

inherent futurity. While disparate in time, Le Guin's crone—and her analysis of the old woman's change-bearing potential—bears striking resemblances to and usefulness as a heuristic for the loathly lady of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The space crone and the forest crone both bear potential for change, and indeed have an otherworldly presence.

The old woman first appears on the edge of the forest, a position which establishes her as a character on the margins; this interpretation is strengthened by her association with the forest, dancing ladies, and a 'grene' (WBT 998). Her geographic positionality is displaced both spatially (as a Celtic motif) and temporally; she is tied to the 'elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,' a historical and now-vanished figure who, according to the Wife of Bath, presents an alternate mode of power aside from the court (860, 998). As Carter argues, 'the royal court, seat of patriarchal power, counterbalances the wilderness setting'—a counterbalancing in which the crone, as a representative of the literal other world of the wilderness, participates in (330). The old crone is thus a figure of the margins of the tale's court and of the Otherworld; she is simultaneously a resident in and embodiment of an 'imaginative field' (Byrne 22). Her appearance is fundamentally speculative.

The body of the crone functions as a site of speculative possibility not only through her position in the Otherworld, but through her power as a crone. The crone appears first in the tale when the rapist knight journeys home in defeat. Having failed to find out what women want, he encounters a group of dancing ladies at the crone's 'forest syde' (990). A moment later, the ladies supernaturally vanish and are replaced with the crone: 'save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf— / a fouler wight ther may no man devyse,' (998-9). The crone, by the knight's reckoning, is so unspeakably foul that the knight, let alone other men, can barely fathom her existence. The knight, seemingly unsure as to what she is, calls her a 'wyf,' my 'leeve mooder,' 'wight,' and one of the 'olde folk' (1000, 1005, 999, 1004). He can barely 'devyse' her; unlike the other women of the tale, who are neatly segmented into roles of queen, wife, maiden, and widow within the court, the crone is unclassifiable and must be circled around (WBT 999; Scala 117). She is

functionally illegible and opaque, 'not obscure, though it is possible for [her] to be so and be accepted as such. [She] is that which cannot be reduced' (Glissant 191, 193). As a crone, she embodies Le Guin's concept of Change and limitlessness—she is at, and is, the margins, in the sense of the margins of a medieval mappamundi, where imagined creatures and depictions of the Other tend to appear. She is a space undefinable. Her body is also one of multiples: in the moment that the twenty-four-plus other dancing women vanish and she magically replaces them, she is at once singular and multitudinous, a sort of coalition in and of herself, maiden and wife and crone within one—a more complete version of the 'assembled' ladies of the court. She presents both speculative and transformative possibilities, and a multiplicity thereof, through her otherworldly, aged body.

When the crone appears in the court, new possibilities for mutual aid follow. After the knight meets the old woman, she agrees to help him learn what women want most on the condition that 'the nexte thyng that I requere thee, / Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght' (1010-1011). They journey to see the queen and enter the court, the knight prepared to give his answer to the 'queene herself sittynge as a justise' (1028). He responds correctly, saying that women wish for sovereignty, and the crone interjects: 'Mercy,' quod she, 'my sovereyn lady queene! / Er that youre court departe, do me right. / I taughte this answeere unto the knyght' (1048-1050). As the crone speaks, she implores the Queen to 'done right.' In other words, she calls upon the queen to enact mutual aid by cooperating with her; the presence of the coalition of women ('youre court') must be present for this solution to be enacted. The solution she proposes—that she marries the knight—both meets her needs and does justice onto the work and educative labour she provided the knight. It also does justice for the maiden at the beginning of the story: by transforming the knight from 'lusty bachelor' to husband, he experiences a substantive transformation in his status which mirrors the crime he enacted upon his victim (WBT 883). He is made to marry (a possible 'solution' for rape in Chaucer's period) and is 'denied physical agency' (WBT 883, Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 6). This solution is in line with medieval ideas of justice, but crucially it is enacted through a coalition, one which re-forms only when the crone appears.

Though her community relationship with the Queen is complicated by the queen's sovereignty, the queen's superiority is questioned by the crone's certainty: earlier, she confidently asserts that 'the queene wol seye as I' (1016; emphasis my own). Her experience of Change has lent her knowledge and powers of prediction. By residing in what Le Guin terms 'Menopause Manor,' the 'Old Woman may do, say, and think [w]hat the Woman cannot do, say, or think' (Le Guin 3). The Wife of Bath's crone is empowered with wisdom. This knowledge, learned from experience, precipitates sovereignty and suggests a kind of community knowledge across the women. It is the crone's body that presents these new possibilities for justice: the text emphasizes her otherworldliness and wilderness connection even as she enters the court, reminding the reader of the green in which she was found right before she appears. The crone presents the capacity for Change—the imaginative possibilities of the otherworld—and thus facilitates mutual aid and community justice both on her own and for the unspeaking victim of the knight.

After the crone makes her request and the knight is given narrative time to complain, the scene ends: 'But al for noght; the ende is this, that he... / And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde' (1070, 1072). At some point, the queen, the crone, and the ladies of the court must have acted to facilitate the crone and knight's marriage. It clearly does *occur*, yet the process by which the crone's request is fulfilled—the inner machinations of the Queen's coalition of women—remain opaque, a speculative possibility. By introducing the crone to the court of women, her ability as a site of imaginative possibilities spreads to the women around her, enabling them to come to a conclusion not through the King's power but through their own ends and means. In dissociating the mechanism of their aid from the text, they also dissociate their aid from the possibility of being co-opted by felawe masculinity present in the Wife of Bath's satire. Instead, the text only refers to the coalition of women as the source of decision that is framed as 'the ende'—effective, irreversible justice (1070). The crone's inherent capacity as agent of Change, and her marginality, allows the court to temporarily become part of the coalition that is her body and to use her body as a site for justice to be rendered. She enables a coalition of women to avoid pitfalls of mutual aid while

simultaneously presenting new possibilities for justice; she creates an otherworld in a literal sense—another world in which the queen and her court may, temporarily, live, or in Le Guin's terms, a new kind of 'space ship' (Le Guin 6).

After the crone appears in court, she does marry the rapist-knight, and the knight vociferously complains about her age and appearance. They argue, and the crone asks the knight to choose between her being a 'trewe, humble wyf' or 'yong and fair' (1221, 1223). He asks her to choose, and she gleefully proclaims that 'thanne I have gete of yow maistrie' (1236). Then, she transforms into a young woman. After she transforms, however, the once-crone 'obeyed hym in every thyng,' and the knight gets all of what he wants and more (1255). The ending of the tale is ambivalent at best: it presents a happy ending for its rapist. Yet the crone's power is maintained up until the point of her transformation. As an old woman, she maintains 'maistrie'; it is only when she transforms that the knight is rewarded. By de-aging the old woman, she reverts away from what Le Guin calls the 'dangerous/sacred condition of being at the Second Change' (2). Yet the crone, up until the moment of her transformation, remains a site of speculation and mutual aid, and the meditation she invites remains a palimpsest.

Just as the Wife of Bath's crone disappears, the space crone of Ursula K. Le Guin disappears, too, at the conclusion of Le Guin's narrative. But in the affiliation between these two figures—constructed as it is—there is a common throughline of speculation. That speculation appears in the long critical history of feminist fantasy and of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Lesley Kordecki describes the Wife of Bath and her crone as 'one of our literary foremothers, a controversial and feisty storyteller,' a description that could just as easily fall for Le Guin as an author as it does Chaucer (Kordecki 19). As Sarah Baechle comments, there is a 'long-standing central tension at the foundations of Chaucer's creation of the Wife, whose stakes themselves reflect critical desire to continue *liking* Chaucer and the Wife' (267). Harris likewise notes a particular ease of reading Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, as a feminist, some aspect of her character that makes us 'feel as though we know' her (Harris, 'Feminism,' 242-3). Just as the crone opens possibilities in the text, her figure and her ambivalence

also invites (and has invited) a critical imagination, speculation, and coalitional thinking which may or may not be reflected in the text.

In reading *The Wife of Bath's Tale* alongside Le Guin's *Space Crone*, the friction between the criticism of the text and the text becomes visible, presenting the crone, in addition to Alisoun, as a site of speculative and indeed imagined coalitions not only between medieval women but between critical theory and its objects. Like the desire to 'like' Alisoun, any analysis of *the Wife of Bath's Tale* as a reflection of principles of mutual aid has an amount of desire attached to it. This desire is more visible in the use of Le Guin's essay and the fictions it creates; the feminism of the 1970s is perhaps more legible due to its temporal distance. Baechle notes that 'the writing of ostensibly feminist fictions, we assure ourselves, can enjoy reparatory power... but this framework for asserting reparatory potential is offered from a position imbricated with precisely the hegemony that liberational feminism insists we resist'; to read *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as liberatory is a manoeuvre that demands interrogation (268). At the same time, 'relegating popular medievalisms to the margins of its inquiries in favor of an aesthetic "rigor" that is as often imaginary as it is real' has also been critiqued as an interpretive strategy (Biddick, summarized in Holsinger, 1220). The Wife of Bath's crone may not be possible to rehabilitate or restore with a feminist reading; at the same time, the possibilities invited by *The Wife of Bath's Tale's* contemporary readings inflects the tale with a sense of coalitional futurity or a desire for one, not only in the text where it remains as a palimpsest but across critique.

Footnotes

1. I wish to thank to Zeynep Kilic for her editorial assistance, without which some of this article's more nuanced points would not exist, as well as the two anonymous reviewers whose feedback contributed greatly to the development of my thinking. Any errors are of course my own.

On these archetypes of femininity, see Beattie, 'Classification in Cultural Context.' As DeVun notes, boundaries of femininity, gender, and sex were not necessarily immutable categories, an observation repeated in Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*: 'Chaucer plays with the gender associations, hermeneutic values, and power relations this structure [of masculine and feminine] suggests' (9). Nevertheless, arguments that the Wife of Bath and her tale's protagonist exist outside of easily available categories of stock woman abound, and the Wife of Bath's association with those categories, even in negation, appear across scholarship (see, for example, Emma Lipton's chapter in the 2017 *Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales*).

2. Beattie notes that these categories are 'culturally constructed' by 'dominant religious and legal ideas in particular historical contexts' (14). The maid-wife-widow model was in particular related to religious doctrine and chastity; Beattie argues that these models of classification were often extended to the legal (and economic) contexts, especially as an extension of the three estates model (Beattie 16; see also Hallissy).

3. See, for example, the women ('A compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye') who plead for help from Theseus at the start of *The Knight's Tale* (898).

4. 'The Space Crone' was published in 1976; Le Guin's thinking on nonbinary and trans identities expanded significantly in her later writings (c.f. 'Is Gender Necessary? (redux), 1988,' in *Space Crone*). Le Guin's essay relates reproductive ability as a marker of femininity and the ability to become a crone—a statement which excludes nonbinary and trans identities, but which *does* broadly apply to medieval conceptions of sex and/as gender (see DeVun, 'Sex and Order in Natural Philosophy and Law.')

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