[essay date January 1991] In the following essay, Ireland compares The Wife of Bath's Tale with an Irish story in which the country of Ireland is personified as a woman—sometimes young, beautiful, and fertile, sometimes old and worn—to symbolize the state of the nation.

The Wife of Bath's search for sovereignty in marriage is the central theme in both her Prologue and in the Tale she tells. Modern criticism tends to maintain a clear distinction between the Wife's Prologue and her Tale, noting specifically that the style of the Tale is more formal and less lively than her earthy Prologue. This stylistic difference is highlighted by the evidence that in some earlier arrangements of the Canterbury Tales the Wife of Bath was originally intended to relate the tale told by the Shipman. Although the Tale's concern with sovereignty in marriage suits well the Wife's own personal preoccupations, its courtly setting and sermon-like style are a bit incongruous for her less-than-idealistic approach to life. The Irish analogues of the 'loathly lady' theme in The Wife of Bath's Tale have long been acknowledged but the Irish parallels of the Wife of Bath herself have not received the notice they deserve. This paper will show that Irish parallels to the Wife of Bath herself are intimately related to the Irish 'loathly lady' analogues through the theme of sovereignty, though certainly not restricted to sovereignty in marriage.¹ Such evidence shows that Chaucer, in this case, had good precedents for his final arrangement of teller to tale.

Since the Irish literary works containing these analogues of the 'loathly lady' and the Wife of Bath are unlikely to be Chaucer's immediate sources their existence in his work suggest that, like his choice of English over French as his medium of expression, many motifs and themes employed in the Canterbury Tales had a common currency in fourteenth-century England. However, their manifestation would most consistently have been at a sub-literary level. In The Wife of Bath's Tale this is most suggestively reflected in Chaucer's use of the word calle 'headdress' (line 1018).² Although its etymology in English is doubtful, it is clearly the Irish word caille 'veil' from which is derived caillech, a word whose semantic development reverberates with meaning for the Wife of Bath and her Tale.

We must, first of all, understand the Irish versions of the 'loathly lady' stories in their full cultural context. One of the most consistently portrayed metaphors throughout Irish cultural history is that a king 'marries' his kingdom and that a royal ordination is actually a wedding feast (banfheis) between the monarch and his 'sovereignty'. In other words the kingdom itself, whether a small territory or the entire island of Ireland, is thought of as female and is espoused to the king. The 'sovereignty' displays her approval and acceptance of the monarch by dispensing a
liquor, or an elixir. This may occur at the wedding feast, that is to say, at the ordination, itself. Or, as is typical in
many medieval Irish political 'prophecies', the 'sovereignty' pours out liquor for a future monarch symbolizing her
acceptance of him and his ascension to the throne. The second element of the word *banfheis*, i.e. *feis*, may
mean 'spending the night with, sleeping with', or simply 'feast, banquet'. The two meanings are not necessarily
mutually exclusive, and in this context at least, are not meant to be differentiated. This extended metaphor of
portraying Ireland as a woman appears to have been well established since the pre-Christian era and to have
survived into the present age, even among Anglo-Irish writers. The 'sovereignty' may be described in a full range
of aspects from a fair young maiden; fresh, virginal and eager for the promises of nuptial pleasures with a
vigorous new monarch. Or, she may be portrayed as a haggard, weary old woman, abandoned by an exiled king,
or widowed at his death. The portrait of the 'sovereignty', then, often serves as a barometer revealing the state of
the nation.

The Irish stories with the 'loathly lady' motif descend to us in two major versions, one might call them the
'southern' and 'northern' versions. Each has its own variants, some told in prose, others in verse, the
intertextuality of this theme attesting to the richness of early Irish literary culture. Both versions are political
allegories meant to explain, claim, or justify, the dominance of certain families in the kingship of their respective
regions. Both versions utilize the established metaphor of 'sovereignty' as a female. The basic outline of both
versions is that brothers, sons of a monarch, are continually being tested, usually in a manner unknown to
themselves. After displaying in various ways their worthiness, they go out together on a hunt where they meet the
'loathly lady' whose detailed description is so grotesque and hideous that she nearly seems non-human. The hunt
out in a wild, often forested, area is a common motif in both medieval Irish and Welsh narrative which signals that
the characters are about to have an 'otherworldly' experience.

In the first, or 'southern', version the sons of Dáire Doimthech compete to see whose descendants will dominate
the kingship of Munster in the south of Ireland. In anticipation of a prophecy regarding who will attain the kingship,
all of the brothers are named Lugaid. A prose variant, which was first noted by Whitley Stokes as an analogue of
*The Wife of Bath's Tale*, is recorded in the *Cóir Anmann* (Fitness of Names). The primary purpose of this text is
to explain through medieval etymologies, like those of Isidore of Seville, the various appellatives or nicknames
used to differentiate one Lugaid from another. A verse variant of this tale is found in the metrical *Dindshenchas*, a
text which records the history and legends attached to eminent places throughout Ireland. It is Lugaid Laígde
who, in order to help his brothers, agrees to kiss the 'loathly lady' in return for food and shelter. She instantly turns
into a beautiful and desirable young woman and reveals herself to be the 'sovereignty'. She says that she will
'sleep' with many of Lugaid's descendants, that is to say of course, that they will attain the kingship.

The second, or 'northern', version is the better known because it deals with the eponymous Níall, the fifth-century
ancestor of the Uí Néill dynasts. The tale explains (or justifies) their subsequent domination of the symbolic high-
kingship of Tara. A verse variant is attributed to the scholar-poet, Cuán Ó Lothcháin (obit c. 1024). He is
described by Eoin MacNeill as one of the 'synthetic historians', a term used by MacNeill, himself a historian, to
describe those medieval scholars actively involved in 'synthesizing' Irish history and legend. Closely related prose
variants are preserved in the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan. In this version the five sons of
Eochu Muigmedón compete for recognition. Four brothers are the sons of the queen, Mongfhind. The fifth brother,
Níall, is the king's son by a slave-woman. In this version too, the sons go out together on a hunt which sets the
scene for an 'otherworldly' encounter. In the evening after the camp is set up each brother goes out singly to fetch
water. Each, in turn, comes to a well guarded by a hideous hag (i.e. the 'sovereignty') who demands a kiss in
return for a drink. Those who refuse are excluded from ever gaining the kingship. Those who comply ensure for
themselves, and/or their descendants, the symbolic high-kingship of Tara. In one variant, Níall not only agrees to
kiss the hag but willingly lies with her. While in his embrace she is transformed into a lovely, desirable maiden.
The allegorical implications are fully disclosed when the maiden, after revealing herself as the
'sovereignty' (*flaithius*), tells Níall:
'Just as you saw me initially as hideous, beastly and terrifying, and subsequently as beautiful, so is the sovereignty; for it is seldom gained without battles and strife but ultimately for anyone it is beautiful and becoming'.12

The descendants of Níall, through the various branches of the kindred, became the most powerful and influential political family in Irish history. Many of its members were redoubtable Irish leaders during the Elizabethan wars in Ireland.

One of the most appealing, yet enigmatic, literary characters from Old Irish poetry is a figure who almost certainly derives from, or at least was modelled on, this metaphor of the 'sovereignty' of a region as a female. We encounter her in a poem which, based on the contrasting opinions of its various editors, one can assign to the ninth century. Although the poem has attracted the attention of several translators and anthologizers, no critical consensus has emerged on just how best to define this character. She is usually referred to as the 'Old Woman' or 'Hag' of Beare, a lonely peninsula in the southwest of Ireland which reaches out into the stormy Atlantic. In the poem she is depicted as having been the consort of kings in her youth, but is now withered with age:

These arms, these scrawny things you see,
scarcely merit now their little joy
when lifted up in blessing
over sweet student boy
These arms you see,
these bony scrawny things,
had once more loving craft
embracing kings. When Maytime comes
the girls out there are glad,
and I, old hag, old bones,
alone am sad.13

The reliance on the 'sovereignty' metaphor in explaining the character of the 'Old Woman of Beare' is strengthened by her insistence that, although she is ravaged by old age, she does not regret her youth and is jealous only of Femen 'whose crop is still gold'. Femen is the plain around Cashel in Co. Tipperary, the site of the kings of Munster.

A tradition that the 'Old Woman of Beare' had a succession of husbands is a feature that reminds us of the Wife of Bath. A prose preface in one of the five manuscript copies of the poem states:

She passed into seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and greatgrandchildren were peoples and races.14

It must be noted, however, that this is not specifically stated in the poem, but only in one prose preface.

Another Irish literary character who probably descends directly from the metaphor of the 'sovereignty' is Queen Medb (Maeve) of the Táin Bó Cúailnge (Cattle Raid of Cooley). Etymologically the name Medb is cognate with English 'mead'. Her name originally meant 'the one who intoxicates' signifying her function as dispenser of the 'liquor of sovereignty'.15 When we meet her in the Táin she has evolved beyond metaphor into a fully developed character with her own clearly-defined personality, personal history and family (including genealogy).

The Book of Leinster version of the Táin, redacted in the mid-twelfth century, opens with the renowned 'Pillow Talk',16 one of the most delightful scenes between a man and woman in Irish literature, and one redolent of a personality like the Wife of Bath. Medb contends with her husband, Ailill, over the value of their respective possessions which is shown to be equal in every particular except that Ailill possessed a fine bull, Findbennach,
which Medb could not match. It is this perceived lack on Medb's part that sets in train the events of the \textit{Táin} when she rallies the armies of Ireland to proceed against Ulster in order to capture the Donn Cúailnge, a bull to equal Findbennach.

But it is not merely Medb's acquisitive nature, nor her martial hardiness (making her the equal of any man) that remind us of the Wife of Bath. For Medb herself demanded an unusual bride-price the likes of which no other woman had demanded of the men of Ireland. Her husband must be without meanness, without jealousy and without fear. In the context of early medieval societies it is easy enough to understand the expectations that a king be generous and fearless. But in a male-dominated world it could hardly be expected that he would not be jealous. Yet Medb insists that it would not be suitable that she should have a jealous husband for as she states, 'I never had a man without another in his shadow'.\textsuperscript{17} Medb's insistence on her own independence is remarkable. Some might argue that her series of lovers is proof that she, at least formerly, was a manifestation of the 'sovereignty'. Each lover would represent a future king. But it must be noted that during the course of the \textit{Táin} she cuckolded Ailill with Fergus mac Róig, a warrior from Ulster in exile among her Connacht troops. Yet there is never any suggestion that Fergus is, therefore, the next in line for the kingship.\textsuperscript{18} Medb, as we meet her in the \textit{Táin}, is more appropriately treated as an invented literary character than as a demoted symbol of 'sovereignty'. Whatever early Irish literature inherited from pagan Celtic ideology we should expect it to play no greater role than that played by Classical pagan deities in other medieval literatures. Medb might well have said, along with the Wife of Bath:

\begin{quote}
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse, \\
and Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse
\end{quote}
(lines 611-12)

Both of these robust, vigorous women characters have much in common regardless of the source of the literary allusions employed to describe them.

The social reality of early Ireland, particularly with regard to marriage and divorce, helps lend these literary characters their vitality. Despite the persistent, and in several respects accurate, stereotype of medieval Ireland as the 'Land of Saints and Scholars', many social customs and practices whose origins pre-date the Church's influence continued unabated. Polygamy, particularly among the higher social ranks, was an accepted practice, as was easy divorce and subsequent remarriage of either partner. These practices persisted, despite the best efforts of reforming clergy, until the collapse of the native Irish order, that is, well into the time of the Elizabethan conquest.\textsuperscript{19} They are customs and practices which were frequently scorned and disparaged by the English in Ireland. Whatever about the orthodoxy of certain medieval Irish social practices, the deliberate syncretism of native Irish customs with those current on the Continent, usually introduced by the Church, is one of the features that makes the study of Irish literature and cultural history so fascinating. This blend is frequently demonstrated in the early law-tracts, most of which were redacted in the late seventh- to early eighth centuries. Early Irish law was 'customary law'. It does not record edicts and legislation but instead delineates social organization and outlines time-honoured practices.\textsuperscript{20}

The law-tract \textit{Bretha Crólige}, concerned primarily with rights and responsibilities in the maintenance of the sick and injured, offers a dramatic example of this syncretism on a matter relating to marriage. It states:

\begin{quote}
For there is a dispute in Irish law as to which is more proper, whether many sexual unions or a single one: for the chosen [people] of God lived in plurality of unions, so that it is not easier to condemn it than to praise it.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

We have here early Irish lawyers, writing c. 700, who cite precedents from the Old Testament as justification for the continuation of the long established Irish practice of polygamy. One can almost hear the Wife of Bath, nearly seven hundred years later, disputing from the standpoint of her \textit{experience} against the Church fathers in favour of multiple marriages. She cites scripture, specifically Solomon (line 35), Abraham (line 55) and Jacob (line 56) in
One must not over-romanticize the status and social independence of women in medieval Ireland. The early Irish law-tracts leave no doubt that a woman was always subordinate to some man: when young, to her father; when married, to her husband; when widowed, to a brother or her son. Nevertheless, a married woman of some social rank who acquired or controlled a fair amount of material wealth (excluding land, which she was not allowed to possess) could act with a degree of autonomy not available to her counterpart in a monogamous society. Irish history provides the names of several such women, a noteworthy example being Gormlaith who died c. 946. She was herself the daughter of a king of Ireland and married in succession three kings: Cormac mac Cuilennáin, king -bishop of Cashel in Munster; Cerball, king of Leinster; and Níall Glúndub, king of Ireland and a member of the Uí Néill. There are several poems attributed to her, most of them are laments for her last husband, Níall. Since some of these poems are linguistically too late to have been composed by her it seems likely that they were attributed to her in order to increase the prestige of the Uí Néill. But it is entirely probable that she herself authored several of the poems. The title Serc Gormliaithe do Níall24 'The Love of Gormlaith for Níall', preserved from the tenth-century saga lists, in addition to the poems mentioned above, attests to the well-established tradition of her great love for Níall. She spent the waning years of her life in a convent.

Gormlaith’s life represents only one historical example of many Irish women whose full lives and multiple husbands might remind us of the Wife of Bath. Many such women flourished during those centuries when Ireland was more completely bi-cultural, with the English customs practiced in the Pale and the native Irish order in force beyond. But we need not confine ourselves to the native Irish for interesting parallels. For example, Dame Alice Kyteler from the English community in Kilkenny had four husbands. She was accused of witchcraft in 1324, perhaps for political reasons, and fled to England. It is often through the disapproving comments of the English in Ireland at the time that we gain insight into the social customs as practiced by the contemporary Irish who saw little need to comment on themselves in this way. For example, the statute of Kilkenny, promulgated in 1366, was an attempt by the English authorities in Ireland to halt the increasingly rapid assimilation of the English colony to Irish customs and manners, including use of the Irish language. It provides a clear example of how Irish customs influenced the English in Ireland and, hence, suggests how Irish terms and customs could become known in the England of Chaucer’s time.

It is this contact between English and Irish that brings us to the next point. Calle is a word found frequently in Middle English texts of the fourteenth century, and is used by Chaucer in the The Wife of Bath’s Tale (line 1018). The new Riverside Chaucer, in the textual glosses at the bottom of the page, defines it as a ‘hainmet worn as a headdress’. The second edition of the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer by F. N. Robinson lists calle in its glossary as ‘caul; hair-net; head-dress’. The University of Michigan’s Middle English Dictionary suggests that it might be derived from O.E. cawl ‘basket, container, net, sieve’, and rejects the suggestion made in the O.E.D. under caul that it is related to O.F. cale ‘small cap; headdress’, arguing that ‘OF cale of the 15th c. is either a back-formation from calotte or a borrowing from English.’ Whatever about the etymology of the French word, the Middle English calle must be a borrowing from Irish caille ‘veil’. This word is among the fifth century borrowings from Latin into Irish. Its Latin source is pallium ‘covering; cloak, mantle’, the substitution of the sound /k/ for /p/ proving its great age. Once Irish caille became current in English usage its confusion with O.E. cawl would only be natural. Both the O.E. and Irish words suggest something woven and, hence, net-like. In the prose tale Compert Conchubair (The Conception of Conchobar) we find an example of caille suggesting ‘net, web’, certainly something woven, in the line ‘she strained the water into the cup through her caille’. This tale provides a particularly interesting context for this word because the characters and events of the tale belong to pagan prehistory. Nevertheless, the Middle Irish redactor understood a caille to be a typical article of clothing for a, in this case, young woman. It is perfectly clear that Mid.E. calle and Ir. caille both meant some type of head-covering or ‘veil’ commonly worn by women. With this overlap in the semantic fields of O.E. cawl and Irish caille it would
naturally follow that the native English monosyllabic word would win out over the disyllabic Irish word, particularly with the tendency for Middle English words to lose final -e.

The semantic development in Irish of the derived word *caillech* has important ramifications for Chaucer's use of *caillé* in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. *Cailléch* is literally a veiled one, i.e. a nun. This meaning is well attested from the Old Irish period, that is before 900, in saints' lives and other religious writings. But already in the same period it had developed the meaning 'old woman', suggesting that many women who 'took the veil' in the early Middle Ages did so as their life options and alternatives were reduced in their later years. Perhaps the most famous example of a *cailléch* in Old Irish literature is the *Cailléch Béri*, or the Old Woman of Beare', discussed previously. She calls herself the *cailléch* in the second stanza of the poem, stating explicitly further on that she now wears the 'veil':

No wedding wether killed for me,  
an end to all coquetry;  
a pitiful veil (*caillé*) I wear  
on thin and faded hair.  
Well do I wear  
plain veil (*caillé*) on faded hair;  
many colours I wore  
and we feasting before.\(^3^0\)

One should keep in mind the historical example of Gormlaith, cited above, who eventually retired to a convent.

Perhaps the most striking use of the term *cailléch*, and one attested in the Old Irish period as well, is as a 'hag, crone, witch'. In the Irish versions of the 'loathly lady' cited above, *cailléch* is used interchangeably with *sentainne* 'old woman' for the grotesquely hideous women the kings-to-be were expected to kiss.\(^3^1\) Thus for anyone familiar with these Irish analogues, Chaucer's lines resonate with deeper implications when his own variant of the 'loathly lady' says to the young knight:

*Lat se which is the proudeste of hem alle,*  
That wereth on a coverchief or a calle,  
That dar seye nay of that I shall thee teche.*

(lines 1017-19)

*Calle*, when seen in a context informed by the Irish analogues, is more than just a woman's headdress. It may serve as a badge of her station in life and may imply those who have taken the veil as their years advanced, women for whom the Irish term *cailléch* applies. In the Wife's *Tale* they are the women in the queen's court whose experience will verify the 'loathly lady's' advice to the young knight. As for the Wife of Bath herself, her own experience must have made her aware of the limitations of her search for sovereignty, for it could never allow her to gain maistrye over time and old age. Despite her lusty, and optimistic, 'welcome the sixte' husband (line 45) as she set out to Canterbury, a sadder and more resigned realization must also reside behind her motives for going on pilgrimage. But it is to our eternal pleasure that Chaucer chose to portray the Wife of Bath when he did, rather than wait until she had become the *Cailléch* of Bath.

**Notes**

1. I do not present these Irish analogues as an example of source study. Given the style and setting of the *Tale* it is hardly likely that Chaucer himself was even remotely aware of the tale's Irish analogues. The best study of how this motif may have come into the purview of Chaucer's work is still Sigmund Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder, a Source Study of The Wife of Bath's Tale* (Wexford, 1957). However, the cultural context of the sovereignty theme and its various manifestations in Irish literature are very informative for an appreciation of the Wife's *Prologue* and her...
Tale. The social history of the period in England makes it quite likely that Chaucer was aware of many stereotypes entertained by the English about the Irish and their social practices.

2. All quotations and line citations from the Prologue and the Tale are from The Riverside Chaucer, Larry D. Benson, gen. ed. (Oxford, 1988).

3. Much has been written on this theme, among the more important articles are: T. F. O'Rahilly, 'The Names Érainn and Ériu, Ériu 14 (1946) 7-28, esp. 14-21; R. A. Breathnach, 'The Lady and the King, a Theme of Irish Literature', Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review 42 (1953) 321-36; Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature', Études Celtiques 7 (1955-7) 76-104, 356-413; ibid. 8 (1958) 59-65; Rachel Bromwich, 'Celtic Dynastic Themes and Breton Lays', Études Celtiques 9 (1961) 439-74.

4. For definitions of Irish words, see the Royal Irish Academy's Dictionary of the Irish Language (Dublin, 1913-76).

5. Notice that in the Tale the knight first sees the fairy women dance, and subsequently meets the 'loathly lady', as he is riding through a forest (lines 989-999).


11. Although in this variant of the tale the brothers are only seeking water from the 'loathly lady' it is clearly meant as a parallel symbol for the 'liquor' dispensed to the future king by the 'sovereignty'.


13. The translation of these stanzas is from James Carney, Medieval Irish Lyrics (1967: Dublin, 1985) 31, 33. The most recent edition and translation of this poem is by Donnchadh Ó hAodha, 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare', in Sages, Saints and Storytellers, Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney, edd. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breathnach, Kim McConne (Maynooth, 1989) 308-31. It gives a full bibliography of previous editions and translations and includes extensive textual notes.

14. Ó hAodha, 309. For a very engaging and insightful discussion of the place of the 'Old Woman of Beare' in Irish tradition, see the recent article by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Eponym of Cnogba', Éigse 23 (1989) 27-38.


17. The line in Irish reads, dáig ní raba-sa ríam can fer ar scáth araile ocum; C. O'Rahilly, 2 line 37.

18. Francis John Byrne notes that archaic genealogical poems, possibly as old as the seventh century, trace the origins of several Munster peoples to this union between Medb and Fergus mac Róig; Irish Kings and High-Kings (London, 1973) 171. Such evidence suggests the depth of tradition and relative age of the stories dealing with the Táin.

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19. For articles treating marriage in medieval Ireland, see *Marriage in Ireland*, Art Cosgrove, ed. (Dublin, 1985), particularly the articles by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Marriage in Early Ireland' 5-24, and Art Cosgrove, 'Marriage in Medieval Ireland, 25-50.


22. ibid. 47. Donnchadh Ó Corráin in his article 'Marriage in Early Ireland' makes it clear that the Irish lawyers drew on canon law in support of their views on marriage and were not merely defending pre-Christian Irish practices against the Church, art. cit. (note 19).

23. For a good overview, consult Katharine Simms, 'The Legal Position of Irishwomen in the Later Middle Ages', *The Irish Jurist* 10 new series (1975) 96-111.

24. The title of this tale is ambiguous. I have translated it on the basis of the tradition of the poems ascribed to Gormlaith which depict her great love for Níall. But according to early Irish grammar do may express the agent of a verbal noun so that a more accurate translation might be 'Níall's Love for Gormlaith'. The likely polito-literary context of this title is discussed by Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Ireland* (Dublin, 1980) 103-05. For some background on Gormlaith, see the editions of poems ascribed to her by Anne O'Sullivan, 'Triamhuim Ghormlaithe', *Ériu* ; and Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin, 1970) 202-15, 308-15.


29. The line reads: *sithlais in uisci isin cuach tria chailli*; Kuno Meyer, 'Anecdota from the Stowe Ms. no. 992', *Revue Celtique* 6 (1883-85) 173-92; p. 175 line 42.


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