

**CONFLICT
RESOLUTION IN *THE
WIFE OF BATH'S TALE*
AND IN GOWER'S "TALE
OF FLORENT"**

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Abstract

Defining the principles that apply to resolving conflicts between individuals in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and comparing them to parallel conflicts in Gower's "Tale of Florent," one discovers that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* foregrounds appeals to political, social, religious, and ethical authority—all of which are questioned, discussed, and negotiated. In the "Tale of Florent," on the other hand, conflict tends to be internal rather than between individuals. Florent's conflicts are resolved by himself alone thinking about the obligations he has accepted in his various covenants, and then behaving in such a way that he does not lie or cheat or break his pledge. Conflict resolution in Gower depends upon absolute commitment to principle, the culturally sanctioned rules that govern human behavior. Conflicts in the "Tale of Florent" are not resolved through argument, debate, negotiation with an adversary as in Chaucer's text.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, John Gower, "Tale of Florent," Conflict Resolution, *Confessio Amantis*, *Canterbury Tales*.

John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer were friends of some sort—political, social, artistic (poets together)—and each wrote a poem based on a source known to, perhaps even derived from, the other. Much scholarly energy has been devoted to the questions of who wrote first, who wrote better, who was making fun of whom if at all, who responded to whom with greater distance and fewer dedications or lines of approval. Recent analyses of the relationship between the two poems have been provided by Peter G. Beidler (1991) and R. F. Yeager (1990). One can enrich that discussion from a point of view that has yet to be taken by examining the way conflicts are resolved in the two texts. "The Tale of Florent" reveals Gower as a poet who defines character in terms of an individual's thinking and commitment to the principles which ultimately define "the good" and direct his behavior accordingly. Gower's is a moral tale designed to instruct. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* reveals Chaucer as a poet who reveals character in terms of discussion, negotiation, compromise—the

contingencies of business rather than the demands of absolutes. Chaucer's is a dramatic tale designed to entertain.

Resolution of conflict is a matter of some concern to Chaucer and his audience from the body/spirit dichotomy in the first 18 lines of the *Canterbury Tales* to the political and social wars of the *Parson's* and *Manciple's Tales* at the end. On the social level of the pilgrimage narrative, for example, Harry Baily nominates himself governor of the gang because appeal to established "authority" was one way medieval culture resolved conflicts. The first conflict on the pilgrimage, however, is not resolved in accordance with the Host's authority: Harry abandons his principles for working "thriftily" (A 3131) when the Miller insists upon telling a tale with which to "quite the Knyghtes tale" (A 2127).¹ This narrative activity is a metaphor for human behavior in general: on the one hand, the social, cultural, or political impetus to recognize an absolute authority to rule (father, lord, king, pope, or God—in line with the medieval theory of correspondences); and, on the other hand, the human penchant, apparent in the Garden of Eden, to disregard authority. In resolving his conflict with the Miller, Harry Baily employs the other medieval way of resolving conflicts: when authority does not work, one must strive to be reasonable.

Western civilization and culture advanced through the Humanism of the Renaissance, the Classical rigor of the Enlightenment, and the labor relationships of the Industrial Revolution and in doing so developed other means of resolving conflicts. Negotiators today generally agree upon certain principles and processes which may be applied to any modern conflict—between individuals or nation states—and which may lead to what is called "a just peace" that balances conflicting powers to the satisfaction of both.² Chief among these are a sensitivity to the position and perspective of the other; a disposition of the two sides to speak to each other, to negotiate, to compromise; and a willingness to work toward a mutually beneficial exchange in order to find a solution in a mutually acceptable common ground. To resolve conflicts, then, is to achieve a balance of powers, of advantages and disadvantages. One must give something to get something. And for that, both sides must be disposed toward an exchange. In general, for modern people, the object of language and rhetoric is to communicate, but for the medieval people the object was to persuade. We work toward mutual understanding; they strive for victory.

Medieval England was rich in legal options both lay and clerical. There were village, borough, or manorial courts, county courts and common pleas

¹ Quotations from Chaucer, by Group letter and line number, are from Benson's standard text (1988). Gower quotations are from Peck's edition (2000-2004).

² Modern theories of conflict resolution are generally available. Among the most useful of these is Rummel (1981).

courts, not to mention the circuits made by the sheriffs and king's justices (Hudson 1996:41).³ Though most judges had adequate legal training, they "were not absolutely required to hold degrees in law" but almost all who served as judges in consistory courts were university graduates often in canon or civil law (Helmholz 1988:142). There were ecclesiastical courts under an abbot or a bishop. Matters of marriage were mostly heard bishops' court though they, like all medieval courts, were problematic. Witnesses were often bribed and perjurious. The judge and the opposing party took depositions but did not normally cross-examine witnesses, so the methods for discovering and evaluating contradictions were relatively weak (Helmholz 1988:159). Church courts favored reconciliation achieved not through negotiation but by coercion—threatening litigants with whipping, flogging, public exposure, or monetary punishment (Butler 2007:73-75). Marital problems not brought to court seem most often to have been resolved by family, friends, or neighbors, unofficial negotiators who often sought a reasonable solution in common sense.⁴

Conflicts in Chaucer and Gower generally take two forms: between individuals and between an individual and an institution. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and her Tale present both forms of conflict. For Alice these institutions include the church, religious authority, the medieval cultural and social definitions of a woman, among others. In resolving these conflicts with institutions, she is proficient in bending, slanting, eliding, misdirecting, and amassing authority to support her own position. This has been the focus of much Chaucer criticism on the Wife of Bath over the past two centuries (Strohm 1992; Hahn 1992; Phuvel 1998; Tinkle 1998). However, since Gower's conflicts are between individuals, a more useful means to distinguish the way Chaucer and Gower treat the same tale will be to limit the discussion and focus on the way conflicts are resolved between individuals.

³ In the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) "English institutions finally take the forms that they are to keep through coming centuries. We already see the parliament of the three estates, the convocations of the clergy, the king's council, the chancery or secretarial departments, the exchequer or financial department, the king's bench, the common bench, the commissioners of assize and goal delivery, the small group of professionally learned judges and a small group of professionally learned lawyers, whose skill is at the service of those who will employ them" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "English Courts"). See also the chapter on "Local Government in the Time of Richard II" in Lyon (1980:513-31).

⁴ And indeed "both counsel and judges [...] exploit reason as a source of authority in the disposing of individual lawsuits and in the shaping of legal doctrine and principle" (Doe 1990:108).

In general, for conflicts between Alice and her husbands, the Prologue privileges violence both verbal and physical and eschews appeals to authority.⁵ When the husbands want to limit her activities or be master of her body and her goods, they want an end to scolding, anger, spiteful chiding, whining, grumbling, and misery in bed, but they have nothing to threaten or trade in order to impose their will upon her. She on the other hand, has both her instrument and her temper with which to inflict them woe and pain –not to negotiate with them but to subjugate and defeat them. She is not interested in negotiation or reconciliation anyway. She reflects the common medieval attitude that “peace-making is [...] treasonous” (Turner 2007:168).⁶ In order to end what she calls the war between them, she wants victory. To that end, winning is all and “al is for to selle” (D 414). She wins by slight or force, by attacking him unfairly and unjustly (“Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt,” D 389), by enduring all his lust, by feigning desire, by being unreasonable. Conflict resolution for the Wife of Bath in the “Prologue” means the husband’s utter capitulation and compliance, reconciliation on her terms alone. There is no authority to appeal to. One must lose and one must win, and since men are more reasonable than women, she says, they must accustom themselves to defeat (D 441-42).⁷

On the other hand, in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, which is more immediately pertinent to Gower’s tale than her prologue, conflicts between individuals, except the rape itself, are resolved by appeal to authority –but that authority is constantly undermined, debated, and circumvented by negotiation. Consequently, the application of rule is bent, amended, irregularly applied and so authority and the principles upon which authority is based are compromised; they are not absolute and monolithic as we shall see they are in “Florent.”

The conflict between the knight and the maid is resolved “By verray force” (D 888), the only example of violence used to resolve a conflict between individuals in the Tale. But the response of the people to such “oppressioun” (D

⁵ “In the late fourteenth century there was no clear dividing line between verbal and physical violence” (Turner 2007:136). “As practiced in the schools, disputation was marked by aggressive language and a tendency toward physical violence. In disputation words were considered blows, and little meaningful distinction would be made between verbal and physical violence” (Desmond 2006:135-36).

⁶ She also notes that Prudence in *Melibee* “makes clear that believing in true reconciliation is absurd and self-destructive” (Turner 2007:180).

⁷ Her attitude here reflects an appeal to her “concept of ‘natural law’ central in late medieval legal thought” (Doe 1990:60).

889) is to approach the royal rather than lay or ecclesiastical courts.⁸ They appeal to the authority both of the king and of the law, but that authority is immediately undermined by the queen's request that she rather than the king or the law decide the knight's fate.⁹ After a prolonged negotiation between the king and the queen and "othere ladies mo" (D 894), who all beseech the king "so longe" (D 895), he agrees to subvert legitimate rule and order and abrogate his responsibility by transferring it to the queen. Then the king, the representative of absolute authority, disappears from the *Tale*.

In "Florent," however, the "desputeisoun" (CA I.1440) between the father and mother of the dead Branchus about how to achieve vengeance against Florent without angering his uncle the emperor is resolved simply by the appearance of the grandmother, "the slyhest/Of alle that men knewe tho" (CA I.1442-43) and a kind of *dea ex machina*. There is no negotiation, beseeching, or debate among them. The grandmother appears with her idea and the matter is settled.

Florent's word for conflict is "quarrel" (CA I.1822) which means "debate," in his case a debate on what to do, based on principle, that he has with himself rather than with some external adversary. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale* the conflict between the queen and the knight, on the other hand, is one in which the knight appears as the passive recipient of the queen's judgment. In fact, the *Wife of Bath* describes an implicit negotiation between the knight and the queen. The queen is in control, her authority granted directly by the king. She poses the question: what do women most desire? Since the knight cannot answer it immediately, the Queen offers a stay of execution. We are told "Wo was this knyght" (D 913) –however "wo" may be expressed: a grimace of despair, body language of resistance– in fact, he sighs sorrowfully and takes his time. Before he can verbalize this implicit appeal, the queen grants him more time. But she

⁸ See Butler (2007:68-97) for the multilayered process set up for violence against women in the later Middle Ages.

⁹ "Guinevere's attempt to assume Arthur's powers by gaining sovereignty over the knight thus violates the very notion of jurisdiction," since "regal jurisdiction flows from God, the ultimate source of earthly justice and law. While the king's absolute authority constitutes 'the force of judgment and [...] the force of law', [...] the king 'must bind himself to keep his own law'" (Blanch 1985:44). Moreover, "the queen's usurpation of regal powers –an inversion of natural order– involves a willful destruction of hierarchical design, God's plan, the principle that gave order and multiplicity to the universe. With legitimate kingly rule rooted in divine authority, then, Arthur must not relinquish his sovereignty, whereas Guinevere, a royal servant of Arthur, must submit to the will of her lord. [...] Any violation of the principle of hierarchy, including the queen's determination of life or death for the knight-rapist, thus creates a fractured social order buttressed by illegality and irrational conduct" (Blanch 1985:44-45) and results in the "feminization of Arthur's court and of justice" (Carter 2003:335).

imposes a further constraint when she insists that he post some surety of his return. As if he had a choice in the matter, as if, that is, they were negotiating to resolve the conflict, he thinks about it as long as it takes for him to realize he has no choice: “He may not do al as hym liketh” (D 914). Then he agrees: “And atte laste he chees hym for to wende/And come agayn right at the yeres ende” (D 915-16).

The parallel scene in Florent is conceived in entirely different terms. There is no negotiation, implicit or other. The scene represents a world governed by principle, the imposition of absolute judicial authority upon the case. His guilt confirmed by the narrative voice, Florent is brought before the sly old grandmother to be sentenced for the death of Branchus: she is “old” and therefore wise, and “sly” because she conspires with the grieving parents to design a ruse by which Florent can be legally killed for the death of Branchus without recrimination. She will get him to agree to his death “Thurgh strengthe of verray covenant” (CA I.1450) which absolves the parents of blame. Unlike the scene in Chaucer, there is no conflict here to be resolved. There is no negotiation with the father and mother or with Florent. An authority imposes judgment, not reconciliation: the grandmother defines the conditions of his release and Florent only asks that the terms be written down, a resolution legally hallowed “under seales” (CA I.1474, 1487).

Both Chaucer’s knight and Florent attempt to discover what women most desire by appealing to the authority of a consensus: Florent turns to the wisest of all the land resident in his uncle’s court and the knight in Chaucer’s version of the tale scours the world for a year before, under a forest side, he comes upon the old crone who claims to know the answer that will save his life. The knight’s negotiations with the old crone are rather straightforward, though fraught with irony and ambiguity. She encourages him to “be glad and have no fere” (D 1022) because his “lif is sauf” (D 1015). His obligation to her for resolving his problem with the queen is to give his word that he will do the next thing the old crone asks of him. The surety he must provide in this case is to “Plight me thy trouthe here in mine hand” (D 1009). This is common practice: an exchange of promises, an informal guarantee; the only thing missing is a witness.

The comparable scene in Gower shares these elements: as Florent rides along, constantly thinking what is best to do, he finds a loathly womanish figure in a forest under a tree. She offers him “conseil” (CA I.1546) that will allow him to escape death and achieve honor. After he accepts, but before she provides the advice, she asks what her reward might be. He responds with the rash boon famous throughout medieval romance and folklore: “whatever you want” (CA I.1555). As the grandmother intended to trap him into death by having him agree to her conditions, so Florent has trapped himself by rashly vowing to

fulfill an agreement before he hears the conditions. And when he does hear them, he offers her land, income, and a game-preserve, but she is not willing to negotiate. He must choose between absolutes: death or marriage. The choice is his. Gower shows us Florent famously thinking, riding back and forth and to and fro, finally deciding that since she's so old and will soon die, he will marry her, place her on an island where no one will know, and so save his life.

Tho fell this knyht in mochel thoght,
 Now goth he forth, now comth agein,
 He wot noght what is best to sein,
 And thoghte, as he rod to and fro,
 That chese he mot on of the tuo,
 Or for to take hire to his wif
 Or elles for to lese his lif.
 And thanne he caste his avantage,
 That sche was of so gret an age,
 That sche mai live bot a while,
 And thoghte put hire in an ile
 Wher that no man hire scholde knowe,
 Til sche with deth were overthowe. (CA I.1568-80)

And so he conditionally accepts: if he must use her counsel to save his life, he will marry her. She accepts this condition, and that's as much negotiation as there is. Gower's emphasis has been upon Florent's interior life, his thinking and devising ways around, but not vitiating, the principles that guide him.

The confrontation scene in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is more dramatic and bears the trappings of medieval judicial authority: the ladies of the court assembled to witness, the queen herself sitting as "justise" (D 1028).¹⁰ The knight offers the answer provided by the old crone; the entire court of ladies agrees that answer is acceptable and decides that he is free to go¹¹ –which, ironically, he is not.

The old crone appeals to the sovereign authority of the queen and her court to enforce the just fulfillment of her contract with the knight. First she asks for justice ("do me right," D 1049), then she lays out the terms of the agreement and announces to the knight, and before the court, what she requests of him. The knight is once again beside himself ("Allas and weylawey," D 1058),

¹⁰ The scene "follows the typical pattern of a lawsuit to recover a debt brought in local courts" (Hornsby 1988:87).

¹¹ This decision might not be satisfying to moderns, but medieval suits of homicide or rape "were more likely to end with acquittal than not" (Butler 2007:197), and this merciful release in fact "duplicates the kinds of penalties recommended by ecclesiastical law" (Salisbury 2002:81). For the Statute of Westminster of 1285 and its applicability here, see Heirbaut (2005:118-29) and Musson (2005:84-101).

acknowledges the truth of the agreement, and begins to negotiate by offering an alternative (“Taak al my good and lat my body go,” D 1061). This is all very polite: a dispute over a civil contract, the two sides negotiating by offering and rejecting. What began in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a criminal case of rape has morphed into a civil case on contract and is about to morph again into an ecclesiastical case on marriage which, of course, never reaches the church court because the conflict is resolved personally and between the individuals in the bedroom.

The marital conflict is clear: on the wedding night, the Old hag is in bed “smilinge evermo” (D 1086) as he “walweth and [...] turneth” (D 1085). She wants to know what she has done wrong and offers to amend it. He responds that what is wrong cannot be fixed: she is “so loothly, and so oold also,/And therto comen of so lough a kynde” (D 1100-1101). Nonetheless, she offers to mend what is wrong if only he will be nice to her (“So well ye mighte bere you unto me,” D 1108). In the “curtain scene” that follows (D 1109-1249), she addresses and counters his claims about gentility, poverty, and age. All this negotiation is one-sided talk, an argument based upon common sense and accepted cultural authority, monologue rather than dialogue. She speaks; he listens. What finally resolves the conflict and guarantees her triumph in the negotiations is her actually, indeed gratuitously, doing something for him that he—limited as he is by reality and bound by nature—never realized could be done: she undermines reality by employing the supernatural. She allows him to choose whether she is to be foul and old but true and humble or whether she is to be young and fair and he must then take his chances with her faithfulness. By allowing her to make the choice for them, he capitulates to her demand that he be nice to her. That she now “gete of you maistrie” (D 1236) is serendipitous; mastery is not what they have been negotiating. So, the defining conflict in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* is resolved through personal negotiation between the contending parties, without appeal to judge, court, legal, or religious authority. They have arrived at mutual common gain, at equal happiness, through a negotiation where each gave up something—sovereignty, authority, the power to choose—to get something, behavior completely uncharacteristic of interpersonal relationships elsewhere in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*.

There is none of this give-and-take in Gower’s poem. The conflict to be resolved is not between individuals but within Florent himself: whether he should use the loathly woman’s counsel, with all that entails, whether he should return to the old hag or lose his honor. He is one who is “with trowthe affaited” (that is, governed by principle, *CA* I.1671) and so behaves “as every knyht therto is holde” (*CA* I.1715). When he returns home with his bride-to-be, for example, he does not ask the privy council of his most trusted men for advice; he tells them what he is going to do. He has no need to consult the wise. He

knows. Florent's world of absolutes and principles governs matters even so small as the custom of combing a bride's hair to hide her locks before the wedding, a custom the women consciously ordain to forego in the case of Florent's loathly bride. Gower carefully emphasizes the principle involved (CA I.1750-56).

Florent goes to bed with his bride because he accepts the principle he calls the "strengthe of matrimoine" (CA I.1777). Once he "herde and understod the bond" (CA I.1798), that is, accepts the principle of being married, he turns toward her without being asked (unlike the knight in Chaucer's version of the tale, D 1249) and discovers her magically transformed. The choice she sets him is defined by absolutes: beautiful by day or by night but not both. The conflict is resolved outside these absolutes only after Florent characteristically thinks "long and late" (CA I.1820) and accepts the principle (of what women most desire). He asks her to make the choice for him, for them, and so she remains beautiful both by day and by night after all.

The hag's transformation to a naked eighteen-year old is completely gratuitous, the implicit reward of the true and honest man guided by principle who honors his pledges. Florent's decision is not one he has to be convinced of, nothing he has to negotiate. He only has to realize the principle that guides that decision. This is appropriate for a hero who has been constantly seen thinking and behaving honestly throughout, unlike the knight in Chaucer's version who begins by raping a maiden and who negotiates with both the queen and the old crone. He has to learn proper behavior –what Florent, with his commitment to principled behavior, already knows.

The Wife of Bath's Tale foregrounds appeals to political, social, religious, and ethical authority, all of which are questioned, discussed, and negotiated, which renders that authority less than absolute. Gower's world is more solid, more fixed, more dominated by principle than by negotiation. Florent succeeds because he thinks long and often and, as a man of principle, he knows what is right.

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