

“IT TAKES TWO”: HORROR AND LAUGHTER IN THE MONSTROSITY OF THE  
MEDIEVAL TO MODERN LOATHLY LADY

A Thesis  
by  
JESSICA MONTINE WHITE

Submitted to the Graduate School  
Appalachian State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

December 2015  
English

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APPROVED BY:

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Alison Gulley  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

---

Craig Fischer  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Colin Ramsey  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Carl Eby  
Chairperson, English Department

---

Max C. Poole, PhD.  
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate  
Studies

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## **Abstract**

### **“IT TAKES TWO”: HORROR AND LAUGHTER IN THE MONSTROSITY OF THE MEDIEVAL TO MODERN LOATHLY LADY**

Jessica Montine White

B.A., Western Carolina University

M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Alison Gulley

This thesis is an exploration of the humor and horror of the monstrous loathly lady viewed through a feminist lens. The loathly lady is a medieval figure who begins as an ugly, loathsome hag and ends the tale as a beautiful young woman as long as a man is able to solve a riddle of sovereignty. Through her transformation, much can be seen about attitudes about women and gender politics as she shifts from a monstrous woman to a normalized one. My goal is to examine her monstrosity as not only horrific but humorous. Traditionally, female monstrosity is only considered horrific, ultimately resulting in the same conclusion: that female monstrosity indicates an unfavorable view of strong and subversive females. However, in the case of the loathly lady, there is also an aspect of laughter to her monstrous appearance. I argue that depending on who the reader identifies with, this humor can often lead to the opposite conclusion. Furthermore, I broaden my analysis of the loathly lady to include examples from the Renaissance and modern day in order to see how these elements,

and thus attitudes on female monstrosity, change over time. As such, the texts I work with are “Tale of Florent” from *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390), the anonymous poet’s “Wedding of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnelle” (15<sup>th</sup> century), Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1380), *A Certaine Relation of the Hog-faced Gentlewoman called Mistris Tannakin Skinker: who was born at Wirham, a neuter towne betweene the emperor and the Hollander, scituate on the river Rhyne, who was bewitched in her mother’s wombe in the year 1618...and can never recover her true shape till she be married & also relating the cause, as it is since conceived, how her mother became so bewitched* (1640), Laurence Price’s ballad “A Monstrous Shape, or a Shapeless Monster,” (1639), the film *Penelope* (2006), and Stephen Sondheim’s Broadway musical *Into the Woods* (1987).

## **Dedication**

There are three people who, without their support and inspiration this thesis would have never existed. This is dedicated to: Dr. Brian Gastle, for introducing me to the loathly lady, who has been a great source of inspiration for me ever since our class in 2011; Kris Fulp, for endless nights discussing Medieval literature and watching musicals; and Jenn Holcomb, for reminding me that my thesis could be fun. Thank you, not just for our friendship but for sharing your own passions and interests. This is for you.

## **Acknowledgements**

*“Everybody will help you discover what you set out to find.”-Bob Dylan*

To me this is one of the most important parts of this document, and as such the most difficult for me to write. As with most educational processes, this has also been a life journey, and as such I would like to acknowledge everyone who has helped along this particular phase in my life. First, thanks to my cohort for being there for me at a time when I did not think I needed new friends and understanding my struggles in a way others could not (Morgan, Jenn, Brendan, Kevin, Matthew, Kaitlin). I would like to acknowledge my old friends, who have been unwaveringly supportive throughout my life and without whom I would have never made it to graduate school (Lillian, Jenna, Nik, Kip, Morgan, Chrysi, Ian, Nathan, Caity, Haley, Kris, Randall). I have the utmost appreciation of Ian, specifically, for being an endless source of not only support but love and for teaching me the value of patience.

Thanks to my committee for teaching me as much with the writing and revision of my thesis as I learned in four semesters of coursework, namely Dr. Alison Gulley for her constant patience during the process, Dr. Craig Fischer for his insightful comments, and Dr. Colin Ramsey for being willing to step out of his comfort zone.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my family for constantly encouraging my intellectual curiosity. Thank you for never questioning my educational pursuits, no matter what they may be.

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## Introduction

The story of the young woman who begins appearing as an ugly hag and ends turning back into a beautiful woman is one that has received considerable scholarly attention. While Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is the best known example of this tale-type, the remaining English and Irish loathly lady tales have not gone ignored. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter published the 2010 essay collection *Loathly Lady Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, which covers all the English and a large portion of the Irish loathly lady tales through myriad lenses. As Passmore writes, "[The] Loathly Lady is the shape of success in power contestation. Because the vehicle of the allegory is gendered, however, and because the motif's fictional flesh is sexually active, these ideas about control are entangled with personal power politics" (xiii). The majority of scholarship, as well as the majority of the essays in the collection, seems to agree with Passmore on this point as the majority of what is written about these tales focuses on their dealings with representations of women and gender relationships. I will not deviate from Passmore, or the leading scholarship on this point. After all, a story about a woman who is once monstrous becoming desirable is one whose portrayals of gender should be closely analyzed and critiqued. However, what most scholarship seems to ignore is that the hag's monstrosity has a dual nature: that of horror and humor. While the characters and the readers are invited to be disturbed and repulsed by the hag's grotesque nature, there are other moments that are seemingly meant to inspire one or both of these groups to laugh. What I wish to explore then is how this duality affects our

reading of the loathly lady as a woman-negative or woman-positive text. Furthermore, I will not limit myself simply to the traditional literary loathly lady tales, but rather I will begin by exploring the English loathly lady tales and then branch out into modern loathly lady stories to examine how these motifs shift in different contexts.

### **The Duality of the Grotesque**

The dual nature of the loathly lady is not terribly surprising given that she is a grotesque feminine figure and the grotesque itself seems conflicted as to whether it is something to be feared or celebrated. In Bakhtinian terms, the grotesque body was signified by laughter. Bakhtin writes, “The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys [necessity] and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning...” (49). As such, the grotesque is a humorous and leveling motif that frees people from their societal concerns. Furthermore, it is connected with horror and monstrosity, as can be seen through our popular culture with television shows like *American Horror Story: Freak Show*. Mary Russo writes about this discrepancy:

There are two discursive formations which dominate contemporary discussion, organized by the theory of carnival on the one hand and the concept of the uncanny on the other... The comic grotesque has come to be associated above all with the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival in *Rabelais in his World*, while the grotesque as strange and uncanny is associated with Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, with the horror genre, and with Freud’s essay “On the Uncanny.” (6-7)

However, she does not see these two views as incompatible as she later states, “[The] two types of grotesque which I have roughly outlined above are not manifest poles facing off

against one another. To locate one significant convergence, I would point out that the grotesque in each case is only recognizable in relation to a norm that exceeding the norm involves risk” (10). Russo then finds that the point in which both the “uncanny,” or for my purposes here the unsettling or “horrific,” grotesque and the “comic,” or “humorous,” grotesque can be connected is that in each there is some sort of risk associated with its outlandish abnormality.

William Paul makes a similar assertion in his book *Laughing, Screaming: Horror and Comedy*. In his study, Paul looks at what he refers to “gross-out films” of the 80’s which fall into the genres of either comedy (*Porky’s*) or horror (*Carrie*). He finds that at the root of both of these films is the grotesque: “The two genres draw on different traditions of the grotesque...The horror film generally follows what Bakhtin sees as the post-Renaissance tradition of viewing the grotesque as supernatural and demonic, while the comedies revert to earlier traditions of folk and popular culture that view the grotesque as natural and animal” (68). Furthermore, Paul believes that the grotesque not only comes in a horrific and humorous variety, but that it has the power to blur the line between horror and laughter. He writes, “The use of grotesque imagery provides the clearest nexus between [comedy and horror]. The grotesque establishes an ambivalence within the films themselves: the horror films often become farcical in the extremity of their devices, while comedies often move into nightmare sequences” (68). While Russo simply sees the horrific and humorous grotesque as spheres that intersect at the point of risk, Paul sees the grotesque as a mode that helps blur the lines of the horrific and the comedic itself. In my study of differing loathly lady tales, I find that the medieval tales tend to keep the two spheres separate, displaying moments of monstrosity broken up with moments of humor, while the postmodern re-imaginings of the

figure tend to present moments as simultaneously horrific and humorous as postmodernism seeks to redefine and bend our concept of many constructs, genre included. Furthermore, I postulate the texts which confine the grotesque in rigid definitions present women in a more negative light than those that see the humor and horror as more fluid. This is because the conflation of humor and horror allows for moments of irony where the audience laughs at the perception of monstrosity rather than at the monstrous acts, laughing with the grotesque rather than at it.

### **Monstrosity**

It is well-accepted in the scholarly community that the loathly lady is a figure whose physical qualities lead her to monstrosity. Dana Oswald writes, “[Monstrosity] is a primarily physical and visible category: in order to be monstrous one must manifest a clear and usually visible difference from that which is ‘normal’” (5). Images of loathly ladies tend to vary in how grotesque and abnormal their appearance actually is; however, in each case they are viewed as hideous and misshapen beyond that which is acceptable. The loathly ladies’ are signified as abnormally ugly by their isolation from their communities as well as their husbands’ unwillingness to consummate their wedding vows. Despite the fact that one deals with societal rejection while the other is more personal, both indicate that their physical deformities have been rejected by the social and cultural understandings as normal, so much so that other normal social standards become invalid: a husband is no longer obligated to sleep with his wife and a community is no longer obligated to accept its members.

Furthermore, these rejections are rooted in a sense of repulsion due to the characters physical form, which does not come without its own gender implications. What is repulsive about the

appearance of these women is that their exaggerated aging, and sometimes animal-like qualities such as tusks, subvert the standard of femininity and wifehood.

But monstrosity is not limited simply to physicality. Oswald elaborates on her original claim, stating, “While physical aberration is the primary attribute to monstrosity, deviant behavior can serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity. Monstrous behaviors help to mark the monster as a cultural as well as physical Other. Some such behaviors include habits of eating, grooming and dressing, reactions to human approach, use of human language, and transgressing gender roles” (6). The loathly ladies portray many of these mannerisms as well. While they often are seen with odd eating and grooming habits, the most notable of the characteristics that Oswald lists is the “transgressing of gender roles.” While loathly ladies have many different ways that they transgress gender roles individually (being unmarried with children, unladylike eating habits, etc.), they all share one common transgression: they control the fate of the men they interact with. Then, to find her actions to be unnerving is to find feminine power to be unnerving, yet again solidifying the monstrous narrative of the loathly lady as an anti-feminist one.

### **Comedy**

However, despite the repulsion towards subversive femininity that comes with positioning the loathly lady as a monstrous figure, there are still undeniable moments of laughter. Watching a recording of a performance of Stephen Sondheim’s 1987 musical *Into the Woods*, one can hear the audience laugh at the character of the Witch as she has what appears to be a seizure in the middle of her song. In John Gower’s 13<sup>th</sup> century ballad “Tale of Florent,” the knight contemplates stranding his loathly fiancée on an island after the marriage so that he will never have to see her or have sex with her. Ultimately, he decides

against it because she will die soon anyway, a thought so absurd and callous that the readers are forced to laugh. But what are the implications of laughter in this context? Can laughter somehow ease the woman-negative undertones of being disturbed by a woman that steps outside of “normal femininity”? My proposed answer is: it depends on what the audience is laughing at.

As we can see in specific genres such as satire, humor has the power to be subversive. Nancy Walker writes, “[The] humor of [the marginalized] is apt to reveal a perception of incongruity that not only questions rules of the culture, but also suggests a different order” (71). In Walker’s analysis, the power of humor comes from its ability to overturn normally accepted conventions. In the type of comedy that Walker is referring to, the laughter derives from seeing something we don’t expect. The readers expect to see traditional hierarchies played out, and when they are flipped, inverted, or otherwise disturbed, they laugh. This is exemplified in the loathly lady figure as well.

While Walker’s hypothesis makes sense for humorous stories of subverted hierarchies written by women, the loathly lady tales are largely written by men (or presumed men). The issue of the gender of the author complicates matters and puts the nature of laughing at the hierarchical reversal in question. Do we laugh because the reversal brings to light the hypocrisies of the social standard or do we laugh because we find the reversal absurd and implausible? The answer to this final question resolves the two I presented earlier. If we find humor in the loathly lady because she presents to us the hypocrisy of the female standard, then she can save her narrative from the anti-feminist implications of monstrosity. However, if we are laughing at her, not with her, then the negativity towards women remains. The answer, I find, differs among the portrayals.

## The Texts

The texts I have chosen to study range from the medieval to the modern and from the written to the theatrical. Generally, I have chosen a variety of texts because I wish to see how gender politics are tied to humor and laughter in several different contexts in order to examine and analyze the differences. But there are more specific reasons for my choice in texts as well. To start, I will examine the medieval English loathly lady tales because, even though they are not the earliest example of the tale-type being predated by the Irish stories, they have set the standard for the motif. By name they are John Gower's "Tale of Florent" from *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390), the anonymous poet's "Wedding of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnelle" (15<sup>th</sup> century), and Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1380). I will then move on to a comparison of a modern representations of the loathly lady and it's early modern source material, specifically the Renaissance chap book *A Certaine Relation of the Hog-faced Gentlewoman called Mistris Tannakin Skinker: who was born at Wirham, a neuter towne betweene the emperour and the Hollander, scituate on the river Rhyne, who was bewitched in her mother's wombe in the year 1618...and can never recover her true shape till she be married & also relating the cause, as it is since conceived, how her mother became so bewitched* (1640), from here on to be referred to as *A Certaine Relation*, Laurence Price's ballad "A Monstrous Shape, or a Shapeless Monster" (1639), and Stephen Sondheim's Broadway musical *Into the Woods* (1987). These latter texts warrant closer scholarly attention as loathly lady stories than they are currently given, and they will allow me to examine how the motifs of laughter and horror have changed with time. Ultimately, in chronologically analyzing the use of grotesque in the loathly lady stories and their relationship to the concept of female sovereignty, the conclusion becomes that

while the dual nature of Medieval and Early Modern loathly lady stories show fear of female power and sovereignty, when the archetype is adapted for a modern-day audience one or, in this case, both of these parts are used to underscore the importance of female sovereignty. In other words, while in the earlier versions the readers tend to laugh at the loathly lady, in later incarnations the viewers laugh on her behalf.

In the first chapter, I analyze “Tale of Florent,” “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” and “Weddyng of Syre Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure.” While it is thought that “Weddyng of Syre Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure” was written approximately 100 years after “Tale of Florent” and “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” I choose to examine them together because of their similarities: they go into great detail about the physical monstrosity of the hags and focus on the male protagonists’ reaction to them. The interaction between the horror and the humor in these texts will also help establish the basic tenets of my thesis.

In the second chapter, I examine *A Certain Relation* and “A Monstrous Shape, Or A Shapeless Monster” in comparison to the recent film *Penelope*. These texts are all adaptations of the same story of a woman who is born with a hog-face and must marry to break the curse. However, in looking at the use of humor and monstrosity, there is an obvious divide between how grotesque bodies were viewed in the Renaissance and in the present day. While the first two uses monstrosity and humor to perpetuate the same negative stereotypes, the latter flips them on their head in order to tell a story about the importance of female self-acceptance.

The divide between the treatment of gender in early and later texts becomes even clearer in the third chapter, in which I explore the Broadway musical *Into the Woods*,

focusing primarily on the character of the Witch. In the play, the Witch is the ugly and magical neighbor of the Baker and the Baker's Wife and is the driving force behind most of the action in the first act as she seeks the cure for her grotesque visage. My first objective here is to define the Witch as a loathly lady character that is comparable to her medieval predecessors. As such, I will not be delving too deeply into her fairytale roots as the fairytale characters she is based on are not transformative and, as such, do not constitute loathly ladies. I will also address recent scholarship on *Into the Woods* which defines it as backlash literature. While, as in most of the loathly lady tales, her monstrosity does lend itself to an anti-feminist reading, the theatrical element of her story becomes important. While the other characters in the play are repulsed by her grotesque nature, the audience laughs at their repulsion; therefore, the audience laughs with her not at her. The use of humor here makes the play more akin to "Weddyng of Syre Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure."

## Chapter 1: Monstrosity and Humor in Medieval Loathly Lady Tales

### The English Tales

In examining how monstrosity and humor interact in marking the grotesque body of the loathly lady as a site of gender politics, it's important to start with the English loathly ladies, which are those in "Tale of Florent,"<sup>1</sup> "Wife of Bath's Tale,"<sup>2</sup> and "Weddyng of Syre Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure."<sup>3</sup> These tales are, of course, not the true origin of the archetype, as they find their roots in Irish predecessors: hags who granted the men courageous enough to kiss them sovereignty over the nation. . In Irish folklore, the loathly lady usually presents herself as a hag guarding a well that a group of men, usually princes, wish to drink from. The hag will not let the prince get to the well unless he gives her a kiss. Of course, all but one of the men refuse to kiss her due to her undesirable appearance, but once she is kissed she transforms into a beautiful woman who names the kisser king of Ireland. However, while it is intriguing to ponder the implications of conflating femininity and national sovereignty in the folkloric tales, what the literary English versions

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<sup>1</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis Vol. 1*, edited by Russell A. Peck, 2006. This edition was written consulting the following manuscripts: Fairfax 3, dated late-fourteenth century; Bodley 902, dated early-fifteenth century; Bodley 295, dated early fifteenth century; St. John's College, Cambridge, 34.B12, dated first quarter of the fifteenth century; Stafford, dated late-fourteenth century; and Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, 63, dated mid-fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer 3rd edition*, 2008. This edition consults the Ellesmere manuscript, dated early fifteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> *Middle English Romances*, edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 1995. This edition consults the Percy Folio manuscript, dated mid-seventeenth century.

bring to the story is the issue of gendered personal (rather than national) sovereignty, making them more pertinent in discussing connections between the portrayals of the female body and views on women as a whole. In using these tales, my goal is not to make a comparative in depth analysis of how each story individually uses monstrosity and humor but rather to draw out general trends exhibited between them to see how the tales as a singular genre use these motifs and what they say about gender. This will establish a foundation of these aspects from which to build on in later chapters. By doing so it becomes clear that, despite the underlying message of the tales, both motifs are used in the English loathly lady tales in order to undermine the importance of female sovereignty.

Each tale is the same at its core, with details and order of events varying. They involve a man of varying degrees of nobility who is sent on a quest to find the answer to what women want in order to save his life. A hag tells him she will give him the answer if he agrees to marry her. He does, his life is saved, and he goes anxiously to the bedroom with her where she appears to him not as the hag he married but instead beautiful and young. She presents him with a choice regarding when she might remain beautiful and when she might be a hag to which he responds that the choice is hers. Having been given the ability to make the choice, the loathly lady is then able to remain beautiful all the time with no conditions. However, despite the tales all using this narrative structure, the stories themselves are in fact distinct variations, and I will briefly outline them here for clarity.

John Gower's "Tale of Florent" in *Confessio Amantis* is the earliest of them and is thought to have set the tone and structure for those that followed. As Russell A. Peck writes, "[The narrative] syntax of its plot, though somewhat similar to Irish analogues, is, in its literary influence, Gower's, and it defines the principal components that function in all the

subsequent English literary version of the loathly lady” (107). In his tale, Florent is a knight who kills a knight named Branchus in battle. He is captured and brought to a castle where Branchus’ grandmother says he may live if he can answer the riddle of “What alle wommen most desire” (line 1481). The hag later tells him the answer is to “Be sovereign of mannes love” (line 1609). He brings the answer to Branchus’ grandmother, his life is spared, and he marries the hag who then turns beautiful and tells him he must choose between having her beautiful during the day and ugly at night, or the reverse. He leaves the choice up to her, and she tells him that she was put under a spell by her stepmother, leaving her ugly, and that by giving her sovereignty the spell is now broken, and she will be beautiful all the time.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* is chronologically the second tale written and diverges the more from Gower’s than “Weddyng of Syre Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure.” In the tale, a knight of King Arthoure’s court is charged with the rape of a maiden and is going to be sentenced to death when the queen intervenes to spare his life as long as he can find the answer to the question “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (line 905). In his search he sees twenty-four maidens dancing in the woods and decides to follow them to see if they know the answer. He loses them, but in their place he finds a hag who tells him she’ll give him the answer as long as he does the next thing she asks of him. He agrees and she tells him “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above” (lines 1038-1040). He completes his quest and the hag asks him to marry her. He does, and on their wedding night, she gives him the choice that she may either be ugly and faithful or beautiful and unfaithful. He says that she may choose, and she tells him that instead she will be both beautiful and faithful.

“Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure” is the longest and most detailed of the three tales. The male protagonist who finds himself in trouble is not the knight, but King Arthoure himself. He is hunting in the woods and finds Sir Gromer-Somer Joure, who says that King Arthoure has given away land that belongs to him and that he will kill him in vengeance. King Arthoure pleads mercy, and Gromer-Somer says he will let him live if, in a year, he returns alone to the spot, wearing the same clothes, and can tell him “whate wemen love best, / in feld and town” (line 91). Gromer-Somer also requests that he tells no one of the agreement. Arthoure agrees and returns to his castle forlorn. Gawen sees him and asks him why he is sad, and Arthoure tells him of the deal. Gawen promises to help Arthoure in finding the answer. Arthoure travels through the woods where he met Gromer-Somer and sees a hag named Dame Ragnell. She tells him that she has the answer to save his life, but in exchange, she wants to marry Sir Gawen. Arthoure finds Gawen, and Gawen agrees to marry her. He returns to Dame Ragnell who tells him women wish “To have the sovereynté, withoute lesyng, / of alle, both hygh and lowe” (lines 423-424). When Arthoure tells Gromer-Somer the answer, Gromer Somer says that Dame Ragnell is his sister and shouldn’t have given him the answer, but that he’ll still spare his life. Dame Ragnell and Gawen marry in a very public ceremony followed by a feast, in which she disgusts the court. They return to her bedroom, in which the scene plays out the same as “Tale of Florent.” She presents the question, he lets her choose, and then she turns from a large and hideous monster into a slender, beautiful woman. Once her stepmother’s curse is broken, she and Gawen spend all night in bed. Arthoure checks on them in the morning, shocked but pleased by her appearance. The poet then goes on to explain how happy their marriage was, though it only lasted five years, as Dame Ragnell dies.

### **The Monstrous Lady**

As mentioned, a defining feature of all loathly ladies is their grotesque bodies. For the loathly lady stories to succeed in their narrative effect, it is important that the women first appear ugly and unappealing. In introducing the loathly lady in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” Chaucer simply describes her as “A fouler wight ther may no man devyse ” (line 999). While the use of “fouler” does make nod to the grotesque, the loathly lady’s appearance is not described in nearly the same detail as Gower and the Rangell poet provide. Gower describes his hag as:

...the lothlieste what  
 That evere man caste on his yhe;  
 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 doun 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! (lines 1676-1687)

Gower’s hag is not just “fouler” but a caricature of all negative aspects of aging, with her drooping, gray, and sunken facial features and her hunchback. Furthermore, she is described

to be sexually repulsive, which along with Gower's aside, is indicated by her "lippes schruken" and "yhe smalle and depe set." He goes on to describe her stature as "[Gret] and nothing smal, / And schortly to describe hire al, / Sche hath no lith withoute a lak;" (lines 1689-1691). With these lines Gower sets the loathly lady up to be not only repulsive, but a larger than life figure huge and deformed enough to be intimidating to a knight who has killed men in battle. Her exaggerated age, stature, and deformity work to characterize her as unsettling in her difference, aligning her grotesqueness with monstrosity.

The Ragnell poet takes Dame Ragnell's grotesque and monstrous features a step further than either of the above poets as seen in the passage below:

She was so fowlle and horyble.  
 She had two tethe on every syde  
 As borys tuskes--I wolle nott hyde--  
 Of length a large handfull;  
 The one tusk went up and the other down.  
 A mouth full wyde and fowll igrown,  
 With grey herys many on.  
 Her lypes laye lumpryd on her chyn;  
 Nek, forsoth, on her was none i-seen -  
 She was a lothly on! (lines 547-556)

She has become almost animalistic, with "borys tuskes" for teeth, gray, ingrown hairs covering her mouth, and lumpy lips. Just as Gower's hag was reduced to a creature other than human through the racial comparison, Dame Ragnell is very literally viewed as other than human by her comparison to animals. Her hybrid nature comes to full fruition during the

wedding feast when she tears her bread and cuts her steak with her fingernail, eating habits which demonstrate a lack of propriety and bring to mind beasts more than women. Noël Carroll notes that “[it] comes as no surprise that many of the most basic structures for representing horrific creatures are combinatory in nature” because these “fusion figure[s]” merge “otherwise disjointed or conflicting categories in an integral spatio temporally unified individual” (*Philosophy* 43-44). Jeffrey Cohen corroborates Carroll’s postulations: “The refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). The readers and medieval court are unsettled by the dissonance created in the fact that Dame Ragnell with her tusks and crude eating habits appears to be both human and animal. She cannot be easily defined as either, making her not simply a hag but a monster. These latter two hags then fully realize the grotesque potential of the loathly lady. Like the “old wife” in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” they are “fowlle” and “lothly,” but the details added by the author allow the readers to see them as exaggerated to the point of becoming the absurd, depraved, and perverse figures that can truly be considered “monstrous.”

However, as Cohen explains, “Every monster is in this way a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves” (13). The loathly lady is not only a grotesque body but a “monster of prohibition [that] exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot--*must* not—be crossed” (13). As such, the medieval loathly lady is not merely a grotesque body, but

a boundary between appropriate and inappropriate female behavior--one defined by sovereignty. The English loathly lady character inherently gains power over the men in her tales through her narrative function. As Manuel Aguirre writes, "Sovereignty is bestowed by the woman in the Irish version, but demanded by her in the English ones..." (276). The answer to both the riddle that saves the man's life and the riddle that saves his marriage is to provide women, and more specifically the loathly lady, with sovereignty.

Even the choice that the loathly lady gives the man exhibits a masculine control over him. Regardless of whether the lady is asking if he'd rather her be ugly during the night or the day, or if he'd rather her be ugly and faithful or beautiful and unfaithful, the choice is ultimately one between the public and private spheres. The man may choose either to have his public life in shambles and his private life joyful, or his public appearances strong while his private life is unbearable. The choice, instead of providing the male figure with a moment of autonomy, further works to demonstrate the loathly ladies' masculine domination over him. Mary Leech writes, "the surest method of controlling feminine agency and sexuality in the Middle Ages was through marriage, particularly within the context of a romance. Normally, after a woman marries in a romance, her identity is all but erased. She is taken out of the public realm and relegated to a private sphere within the home" (216). Just as women are swept into the private realm after marriage in traditional romances, in loathly lady tales, marriage leads to the man facing the possibility of not being able to move between spheres as he normally does. Thus the loathly lady's choice effeminizes the male protagonist and allows her to take the masculine role in the situation.

The loathly lady exerts dominance over the men within her tale in a manner that does not allow for compromise. Leech postulates that Dame Ragnell "is the one who directs every

aspect of the marriage, from its inception to its consummation” (223). Control over the marriage, and subsequently the protagonist, is evident in all of the English loathly lady tales, but what is noteworthy about them is the force through which the loathly lady pursues this power despite resistance. When the other characters try to restore the hierarchical balance and to insist on their own agendas, she does not allow it. Florent, upon first hearing the hag’s offer of marriage, denies her, instead looking for another solution, offering her “Of lond, of rente, of park, of plowh, / Bot al that compteth sche at noght” (lines 1566-1567). The hag forces Florent to bend to her own desire. Chaucer’s hag exerts her dominance in a slyer manner. She tells the knight that she will give him the answer as long as “The nexte thyng that I requere thee, / Thou shalt it do, if it lye in they might” (lines 1010-1011). The knight does not know what he is exchanging the information for until his life has been spared, thus eliminating his ability to protest the deal. The loathly lady has then not only taken away his right to choose whom he marries, but also his ability to make a fair deal, taking his sovereignty twice-over. Dame Ragnell is the most outspoken of the three. In several instances other characters try to destroy her control over the situation and to whisk her into the private sphere and in each she refuses. Arthoure tries to arrange Gawen and Dame Ragnell’s wedding to be a private affair, but she says ““Nay! Syr Kyng, nowe woll I nott soo; / Openly I wol be weddyd or I parte the froo, / Elles shame woll ye have!” (lines 506-508). She verbally acknowledges his status but refuses to allow that to sway her. She then tells Arthoure that she will ride directly behind him on her way to his castle, again asserting her right to be made visible to the public. Similarly, disturbed by the marriage which she sees as “an outrage scarcely to be endured” (Peck 124), Guinevere asks her to marry in the early morning, when most people in the court will still be asleep, but again the loathly lady insist

that she “wol be weddyd alle openly” (lines 575). As such, she claims the same right to the public sphere as a man would have. In general, the loathly lady, by insisting on her own motives and agendas, refuses to be silenced thus exhibiting a masculine quality that the other characters find disturbing but are unwilling to fight against.

The loathly lady’s sovereignty is mostly demonstrated as destabilizing her place as a woman, but it’s important also to understand the conditions that allow it. Peck writes of “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell,” “Like its two literary predecessors this Loathly Lady story defines feudal law and allegiance but it places those concerns more directly in the hemisphere of kingship, with Arthoure functioning more as a target of careless rule than an exemplar of truth.” He further explains:

The narrative begins with the effeminization of Arthoure, as he is made subservient to Gromer’s command. But unlike other medieval romance narrative (e.g. Chretien’s “Yvain,” in which the privileged male is put under constraint until he sees better), there is no evidence that Arthoure, as a disadvantaged aristocrat, learns anything from his ordeal. . . But as the narrative proceeds into the Gawen portion of the story we see that we are very much in a realm in which the real power, or at least the balance of moral power, lies with the disadvantaged, the women, albeit somewhat ambiguously in that to some degree the women are filling a vacuum left by the inattentive Arthoure. (123)

Here Peck refers specifically to “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell” because King Arthoure, rather than a knight (named or unnamed) of the court, is the one whose morals are in question. All the tales may feature the transgression of male nobility, but only the Ragnell

poet makes the transgressor the head of patriarchal society. His moral lacking is evident not just by his misstep in ignoring Gromer-Somer's claim to the land but also through his actions after their confrontation (actions he notably does not have to face consequences for). While he may uphold his promise to come alone, he does not keep the deal secret as he says he will but rather tells Gawen with little prodding that he has found himself in a dangerous situation, while simultaneously admitting to Gawen that Gromer-Somer “. . .charyd me I shold hym nott bewrayne; / His counsell must I kepe therefore, / Or els I am forswore” (lines 146-148). Thus he acknowledges that he may face death for telling Sir Gawen the story but continues despite the unfavorable consequences, exhibiting a recklessness that has threatened his life earlier and now (as far as the readers are concerned) potentially again. Furthermore, the morality of keeping an oath is not what makes Arthoure hesitate in confessing but rather the consequences. The importance of keeping one's word is lost on Arthoure, a negative characteristic for a king in medieval romance.

Gawen is often upheld as the moral center of this tale in Arthoure's absence. Leech writes, “Unlike the other knights in the Loathly Lady tales, Gawen has no obvious flaw. Gawen never acts unchivalrously; he is never discourteous to anyone, not even the hideous Dame Ragnell; he never argues with Arthoure, nor does he ever sway from his duty to his king” (213). While all of these assertions are true, even Gawen sees no purpose in King Arthoure keeping his promise in the above exchange. Instead of telling Arthoure that he understands if he cannot tell him what happened with Gromer-Somer, he encourages him to break his oath by saying, “Nay, drede you nott, lord, by Mary flower! / I am nott that man that wold you dyshonour, / Nother by evyn ne by moron” (lines 149-151). While his reason for asking may be noble—he wishes to help his king—he does not act as a voice for morality

for Arthoure. Instead Dame Ragnell must take control and teach morals to both knights. While this may be especially notable in “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell” due to the aforementioned incompetence of the patriarchal head, the “moral vacuum” left by men of power is seen in the other two tales as well. The male protagonists here may not be kings, but they are knights and with that title hold their own important space in the hierarchical structure. Furthermore, they both commit crimes that are more morally unsound than Arthoure’s decision to give away Gromer-Somer’s land, namely rape and murder. Their moral transgressions then create the circumstances in which the loathly ladies may take control of the situation. Also it is the queen and grandmother, not the king, who decides their fate, further positioning women in a place of moral authority.

These tales are easily read as moral lessons. A man commits a crime that in some way threatens an individual’s sovereignty (sovereignty over life, sovereignty over body, and sovereignty over land). He is sent on a quest in which sovereignty is the answer to the question, and must pay a horrific price for that answer. He then is able to escape the consequence by demonstrating that he has truly learned the importance of sovereignty. Of course, given that the answer is specifically female sovereignty, and it is a woman that he must give sovereignty to at the end of the tale, reading the stories as parables then complicates arguments that they look poorly upon the loathly lady’s autonomy. However, to see the end of these tales as demonstrating that the man has “learned his lesson” is an oversimplification of both the scenes and the story leading to it.

At the heart of the loathly lady stories are riddles—the riddle of what women want and the riddle of whether the public or private sphere is more important—and as such understanding the narrative attitude towards the riddles is imperative in understanding

narrative gender attitudes. Aguirre notes that the riddle motif is one of the primary differences between the Irish and English loathly lady tales. He explains:

each section constitutes a riddle, that each riddle poses a challenge demanding an unreasonable answer, and that the texts therefore simply reinforce the nature of the Challenge, first, by repeating it three times and, secondly, by verbalizing it in the shape of riddles. It may thus be concluded that the Riddle motif has not been merely appended to the English versions but is in actual fact an additional symbol—alongside those of Hunt, Adventure, and Courtship—to give a verbal shape to the test, a test already found in Niall’s [an Irish] tale, and central to which stands the loathly hag. (276)

He further states, “A correlation between woman and the unreasonable is inescapable...” (273). The connection between women, the sovereignty riddle, and unreasonableness is palpable when examining the instances in which the riddle appear. For instance in “Tale of Florent,” the castle is concerned with how they might find vengeance on Florent when he is related to the king and killing him could cause greater issues. Then Branchus’ grandmother is introduced:

Ther was a lady, the slyheste  
 Of alle that men knewe tho,  
 So old sche myhte unethes go,  
 And was grantdame unto the dede:  
 And sche with that began to rede,  
 And seide how sche wol bringe him inne,  
 That sche shal him to dethe winne

Al only of his ognhe grant,  
 Thurgh strengthe of verray covenant  
 Withoute blame of eny wiht. (lines 1442-1451)

The riddle is then the solution to the problem of how to kill a man without “blame of eny wiht.” By its nature, the riddle is meant to be unsolvable and is presented not so that Florent may have a chance to live but rather so to give the appearance of giving him that chance. It is also given to him not by the king of the court, or Banchus’ father, but instead by his grandmother, who has a reputation for unreasonableness as a woman who is the “slyheste of alle that knew tho.” The same idea of the riddle being an impossible, unreasonable task that will surely lead to the protagonist’s death is also seen in “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell.” When Arthoure comes to Gromer-Somer with the correct answer, he becomes outraged, saying “And she that told the nowe, Syr Arthoure, / I pray to God I maye se her bren on a fyre!” (lines 473-474). Gromer-Somer then knows exactly who told Arthoure, as there is only one way that he might have known the answer to the riddle he was not meant to solve. Of course, the fact that the riddle itself being presented as an impossible question also works to define women as inherently unreasonable. No man knows the answer to what women truly want because women are not as logical as men. It also appears that women do not really know what they want, as the male protagonists asks hundreds of women the question, only to get many different answers and never the right one. Even when he finds the true answer, he seems unwilling to accept that “sovereignty” may be the real answer, as he presents his questioner with the other answers before finally deciding that the hag is correct. The loathly lady as the gate-keeper of the question herself is then a figure not only of sovereignty but of unreasonableness. Leech writes, “In this experience of knowing what

should not be known comes power. In the case of the Loathly Lady, that power is in knowing the answer to the riddle that saves the knight's life" (218). Her power, and thus sovereignty, is rooted in the impossibility of the quest, marking her with the same unreasonable nature that Branchus' grandmother has. She then presents the man with her own unanswerable question.

The riddle in the bedroom functions similarly to the one that saves his life. The male protagonist has found himself in a predicament that is only solvable by answering a question that is unreasonable in nature. As previously mentioned, the question is one that asks him to give up the integrity of either his private or public life, a choice that he should not be forced to make. The answer to the question is to, in fact, not answer the question but rather to "bestow sovereignty" onto the loathly lady. In this final scene the tales seem to take on their moral quality, as is especially evident in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Here the male protagonist is charged with rape (stealing a woman's sexual sovereignty), is given the task by the Queen (a woman with sovereignty), finds the answer to the question, and then, having learned his lesson, gives the hag sovereignty so that they may live happily ever after. But does the knight give the hag sovereignty because he now values female sovereignty or because there is no good answer? He says that he will let her choose because "I do no fors the wheither of the two, / For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me," admitting that he simply does not have a preference between the two because they are both equally difficult for him and that is why he is giving the choice back to her (lines 1234-1235). The protagonist does not let her choose out of wishing his wife to have autonomy but instead a wish to relinquish responsibility for yet another impossible task. The other two knights have similar reactions to his options. Gawen says "[The] choyse is hard! / To chese the best itt is froward, / Wheder

choyse that I chese!” (lines 667-669) and in pondering the unreasonable nature of both options ultimately decides ““The choyse I putt in your fyst—”” (line 678). Similarly, Florent tells his wife, “For I can nought miselve gesse / Which is the beste unto my chois. / Thus grante I yow myn hole vois” (lines 1826-1828). Clearly, these men do not allow their loathly ladies to make the choice because they feel that they deserve it, but rather because the choice is so unreasonable that they wish not to choose. Again the loathly lady is presented as unreasonable as she gives her husband an unfair choice, and again female sovereignty is presented as an unreasonable answer to an impossible question. Thus, her position as a woman with sovereignty is presented as equally perverse.

The connection between the loathly lady’s sovereignty demonstrated above and her horrific body is clearly made in “Tale of Florent” and “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell” as they become more monstrous the more they usurp autonomy from the male protagonists. Such is demonstrated in the following passage when Florent first sees the loathly lady:

He syh wher sat a creature,  
 A lothly wommannysch figure,  
 That for to speke of fleich and bon  
 So foul yit syh he nevere non. (lines 1529-1532)

Clearly the lines between the description above where he first meets the hag and the earlier description more than quadruple, but more than that, the above description is more reminiscent of Chaucer’s “fowlle,” “lothly” woman, providing only enough information that the readers know to think of her as ugly and even inhuman; however, the passage does not provide the same unsettling, visceral detail as “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell.”

Furthermore, while the above passage illustrates his first meeting, the earlier one shows when he sees her after giving Branchus' grandmother the correct answer to her question, thus sealing his fate to marry the loathly lady. Therefore, in officially taking away his autonomy to choose his own wife, the hag becomes more grotesque and horrific. In asserting herself in the masculine role of choosing the spouse and subverting gender norms, she becomes more monstrous. Dame Ragnell experiences a similar progression in her tale. While her description upon first meeting King Arthoure and before her marriage to Gawen have similar length and tenor, her monstrosity moves from that of simply appearing monstrous before the wedding to acting monstrous as she hideously consumes all of the food at the wedding feast. Her actions not only meld the categories of animal and human as I previously described but also blur the lines of proper and improper female behavior. The ambiguity is demonstrated by her clothes which were "worthe...mark / Of good red nobles styff and stark, / So rychely she was begon," shown in conjunction with her eating habits defy medieval conduct codes for women (592-594).

Moreover, the loathly lady loses her autonomy when she loses her grotesque body, as she is what Carroll calls a "fission monster."

[With] fission, the contradictory elements are, so to speak, distributed over different, though metaphysically related identities. The type of creatures that I have in mind here include doppelgangers, alter-egos, and werewolves. Werewolves, for example, violate the categorical distinction between human and wolves. In this case the animal and the human inhabit the same body (understood as spatially locatable protoplasm); however, they do so at different times. (Carroll 47)

Logically, the loathly lady would lose her sovereignty when she becomes beautiful because it is the nature of her fission. She cannot be simultaneously dominant and beautiful by societal standards as these are dissonant qualities, so these qualities are split across different temporal spheres. When she loses the monstrous behavior, she thus loses the monstrous body as can be seen at the end of these tales.

Dame Ragnell, who has shown no fear in insisting upon her personal desires and has had long monologues asserting her authority over other characters in her tale, becomes surprisingly accommodating and quiet after she is made beautiful. As Sue Niebrzydowski writes, “The result of Ragnell’s dramatic weight loss is the reduction not only of her size but also her vitality. She becomes a silent, slender, and contained body” (98). Her silencing becomes evident when Arthoure comes to check on Gawen in the bedroom the next morning. Gawen arises from bed and explains the circumstances of both the wedding night and Dame Ragnell’s curse while she says nothing. Dame Ragnell allows a man to speak for her, both introducing her and explaining her own personal narrative, an action she does not allow up until this moment. Furthermore, the rest of the poem is dedicated to describing their marriage and how content Gawen was in it, giving no regard to Dame Ragnell’s own happiness. Instead she takes her place as “the fayrest lady of ale Englonde” performing her wifely duties for Gawen and bearing him a son, Bethleme (line 826). She has transformed not simply from horrific to gorgeous but from a woman who insists on her public visibility to a woman who has found her place in the private sphere.

“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” does not have the same sort of extended ending as “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell” but ends shortly after she turns beautiful, so her fate is not as apparent as Dame Ragnell’s; however, when taking the ending in context

with “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” it seems that the loathly lady succumbs to the same fate as the Wife. In “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” The Wife of Bath tells the pilgrims about an argument she had with her late husband, Jankyn, over a book of “wikked wyves” (line 685). The fight quickly turns from verbal to physical with her punching him and him responding by hitting her so hard that she becomes deaf in one ear. Feeling guilty, Jankyn gives her sovereignty over his estate and the Wife of Bath never argues with him again. She says “God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde” (lines 823-824). For control over his estate, she then becomes the ideal wife. The exchange is remarkably similar to that of the loathly lady: for sovereignty over her own body, she provides the knight with the ideal situation. Given that the Wife of Bath is telling this tale to her own liking and with her own agenda, it is then easy to assume that the loathly lady becomes the same model wife as the Wife of Bath and as Dame Ragnell.

### **The Humorous Hag**

As well as triggering horror and disgust, the incongruity of the loathly lady’s monstrous body also results in laughter. While humor can often lead to a subversion of societal perceptions, allowing the readers to empathize with the Other, it can also have the opposite effect. Albrecht Classen writes,

[Laughter] implies extensive and complex thought processes that happen consciously or not but which are certainly in contradiction to the standards, norms, and common ideals of a specific community...Moreover, laughter implies a plethora of intentions, strategies, forms of aggression; it can also hide fear and insecurity, or expose an individual’s deeply hidden feelings. (2)

He elaborates, “The audience can laugh, for instance, because it feels superior to the ignorant foolish person on the stage or in its general presence. But there is also the possibility that the transgression of the norms assumes a greater proportion, yet the audience, or those who laugh about it, feel that they are on the same level with the foolish person” (5). Because humor is an enigmatic emotion that largely comes from “deeply hidden” parts of the unconscious and brings with it its own duality, the exact nature of laughter hinges on whether it comes from a place of empathy or superiority, to whom the readers feel empathetic for or superior to, and why they feel empathetic or superior. In the English loathly lady tales, the empathy tends to fall with the male protagonists for having to marry an ugly hag while the readers simultaneously feels superior to the hag’s monstrous nature, thus affirming the negative views of female sovereignty that the horror implies.

“Tale of Florent” incites laughter from the readers by inviting them to empathize with Florent. After Florent tells Branchus’ grandmother the answer and realizes he will have to marry the loathly lady, he thinks of fleeing but decides not to. Genius, the narrator, then explains the situation to the readers:

Loke, how a sek man for his hele  
 Takth baldemoine with canele,  
 And with the mirre takth the sucre,  
 Ryht upon such a manner lucre  
 Stant Florent, as in this diete:  
 He drinkth the bitre with the swete,  
 He medleth sorwe with likyng,  
 And liveth, as who seith, deyinge. . . (lines 1703-1710)

The purpose of the passage is for the readers to empathize with Florent. Genius uses an experience that every person would have had, taking a medicine in order to get better, to exemplify both the unpleasantness and necessity of marrying the hag. It explains to the readers why Florent would choose to stay true to his word and marry her when to do so would be to live as if he were “deyinge.” The fact that Genius feels it is necessary to clarify why Florent would keep his word means that the humor here works to underscore the unreasonableness of the loathly lady’s request due to her undesirable, grotesque body. Thus the readers laugh at Florent’s plight because they understand how terrible and yet inescapable the situation is for him. Furthermore, the act of comparing the hag to a medicine is the source of the humor in the above passage, as is the cause of dissonance—a person, no matter how unpleasant and helpful, cannot literally be a medicine. However, the laughter is not only caused by the dissonance is jarring but because his reaction is so understandable. The readers have no question about whether marrying a foul woman is the equivalent to taking a foul medicine. The laughter then also works to further dehumanize the loathly lady, as can be also seen in “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell.”

The key comedic moment in “Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell” is her monstrous behavior during the wedding feast, and the laughter is similar to the humor in “Tale of Florent.” At her wedding feast, Dame Ragnell demonstrates an inhuman appetite.

When the service cam her before

She ete as moche as [six]<sup>4</sup> ther wore

That mervylyd many a man

---

<sup>4</sup> Shepherd uses manuscript symbols for the numbers. Here I have replaced them with the numbers they represent.

Her nayles were long ynches [three]  
 Therwith, she breke her mete ungoodly—

Therefore, she ete alone.

...

There was no mete cam her before,  
 Butt she ete itt up, lesse and more,  
 That praty fowll damsell. (lines 605-609 612-615)

In this passage, the contradiction that results in humor is Dame Ragnell's animalistic qualities. In short, it's the same dissonance that results in her horror. Because readers do not typically see themselves as animals, the laughter that results from her eating is not from a place of empathy but one of superiority. Her eating habits are outlandish and uncouth, and the readers know that at the very least they would have the decency to cut their meat with a knife instead of their fingernails. However, there is a sexual undertone in this passage that is also humorous as her insatiable appetite alludes to *vagina dentate*, a motif that draws a connection between the mouth and vagina. While typically the motif is exemplified by a vagina bearing teeth, it can also refer to any vagina that is viewed as consumptive, as is the case with Dame Ragnell. Niebrzydowski postulates, "Ragnell's voracious appetite for food suggests that her appetite for sex will be equally unrestrained and gluttonous. Here again the audience is required to laugh, now at Ragnell's behavior parodying that acceptable from a courtly lady; and at the Arthoureian court's concern for Gawen's wellbeing after his wedding night" (98). If Dame Ragnell acts so unladylike at the table, then she must be equally improper in bed. The readers are then encouraged to think that if she voraciously consumes literal meat, she must do the same with the figurative kind. But why do they laugh? Because

her sexual appetite mimics and is in accordance with her appetite for food, it is given much of the same tenor. The humor does not work to provide empathy because the readers could barely imagine translating her behavior during the feast into the bedroom, but instead works to further Other her. Not only is she bizarre and unruly in her public life, but she's the same in her private life too. Arthoure and Guinevere's concern for Gawen's wellbeing after a night with the loathly lady further demonstrates the perceived unreasonableness of her actions, just as the humor in "Tale of Florent" does. The readers do not empathize with her, thus saving her sovereignty from being labelled as negative, because if they use her dining behavior as a model for what is to happen later that night, they too are scared for Gawen and what her talons might do to him.

While all loathly ladies confront issues of sovereignty and monstrosity, the English loathly ladies do so in a prescriptive manner. There may be variances between them, but each follows the same skeletal narrative format. Within the format, the loathly lady's monstrosity always comes to the forefront, turning a story that appears to be about the importance of female sovereignty into a tale that denounces the very thing it pretends to uphold. Humor, as we will see in subsequent chapters, often works to turn these stereotypes and negative conceptions on their heads, but it can also work to uphold them as the audience continues to belittle the marginalized. In the English loathly lady tales, it does the latter thus reinforcing an adverse view of female autonomy.

## Chapter 2: The Transformative Hog-faced Woman

The importance of reader identification in both the horror and humor of the loathly lady is clear when examining the literature related to Tannakin Skinker, a monstrous figure from the early modern period, and the modern-day film adaptation of her *Penelope*. Both figures are women cursed with a hog's face who believe that the curse will be lifted once they marry a man with noble blood. In the literature of Tannakin Skinker, the readers are invited to think of themselves as potential suitors who may receive a large dowry, rather than feeling any sort of pity for Tannakin Skinker for being cursed; however, in *Penelope* the viewers are invited to identify directly with Penelope and her story of seeking independence despite her cursed pig-face. The act of identifying with Penelope creates a narrative on the importance of female self-acceptance. Furthermore, by seeing the same loathly lady character presented in both an Early Modern and modern-day context, the difference in how female sovereignty is treated (fearsome in the former and desirable in the latter) becomes clear.

In discussing Tannakin Skinker I will be using two texts: the chapbook *A Certain Relation* and Laurence Price's ballad "A Monstrous Shape, or a Shapeless Monster." While *A Certain Relation* is the only one of the two that names the woman directly, both tell the same story. Tannakin is a woman who is from Holland but lives in London and is looking for a husband in exchange for a large dowry. The catch is that Tannakin, while being a normal woman up until the neck, has the face of a pig and eats slop out of a golden trough. According to *A Certain Relation*, her face makes her unable to speak, but she is able to

express her desires through writing. Many suitors come to see Tannakin but ultimately run away, horrified by her face. *A Certain Relation* describes her origin, saying Tannakin's mother refused to give money to an old woman. The old woman then cursed her daughter to have a pig's face. As a child, her parents took her to an alchemist who told them that the only way to break the curse was for her to marry a gentleman. While the two stories do not directly reference each other and one is far more detailed than the other, it is generally accepted that they are about the same woman and incident "due to [the ballad's] issue date and its subject matter" (Gniady 92).

### **The Hog-faced Woman and the Loathly Lady Tales**

Tannakin Skinker is not typically part of the scholarly discussion of loathly ladies and is more often categorized as a story of prodigious birth. The author of *A Certain Relation* wishes the readers to draw the connection between the birth of Tannakin and other stories of prodigious births, as he opens his story chapbook:

Prodigies have bin in many of the most times, and prodigious births almost all ages. For the first, the best Authors affirme, that when the *Tarquins* were banisht *Rome*, a Serpent was heard to barke, and a dogge to speake; and that in the second punick Warre, an oxe pronounced these words, *Cave tibi Roma*.  
 . .I come now to prodigious Births, of which this woman now in agitation is the fole Argument; and that it may appeare the more probable, to that shall call the truth thereof in question; I shalt intreate such but to looke backe into the Histories of the times past. (A-A1)

He uses the past prodigious births in order to establish authority on the tale that he is about to tell: one of a woman born with the face of a pig, and given the hybridity of her nature, since birth, it makes sense to draw a parallel between Tannakin and prodigies.

However, by the end of the chapbook, the author uses another story in order to establish credibility in the truth of Tannakin Skinker. As mentioned in Chapter 1, “Tale of Florent” is considered the defining literary loathly lady tale, and *A Certain Relation* makes direct reference to Gower’s work. The author ends his story with a re-telling of “Tale of Florent” in order to convince the readers that there is hope that what he says is truth. He writes:

I should but lose my selfe in writing, and tyre the Reader in turning over many Voluminous leaves of paper, to shew you here many severail men and of sundry conditions, came in a kinde of jealousie one of another, to purchase this masse or magazine of money: every one ambitious after the portion, but not one amongst them amorous or the person, whose countenance was so farre from seeming lovely to them, that it appeared altogether lothsome, and so I will leave her in this exigent, to acquaint you with a short story, that the carriage of the one, may make the other appeare more probably, they being of like affinity. My Authour is *John Gower*, and thus it hapened. ( B3)

The telling of “The Tale of Florent” story then serves two purposes. The first is to again establish that Tannakin Skinker is a real woman with whom the readers might choose to marry for a great sum, as he states his goal is “to acquaint you iwht a short story, that the carriage of one, may make the other appeare more probably. . .”; however, it is only possible due to the author’s self-purported “like affinity” between the tales. Thus the author asks the

readers to see the story as being in line with Gower's and, as such, to see it as a loathly lady tale, even referring to her appearance as "lothsome." Furthermore, the second purpose which the Gower adaptation serves is to convince the readers that Tannakin might truly be able to become a beautiful woman through the power of a proper marriage by a man who can accept the duty despite her appearance. Up until this point, the only evidence that she would actually transform was the promise of her family who claims an alchemist told them it would happen. However, much like listing examples of past prodigies and prodigious births allow the readers to see her existence as plausible, giving a past loathly lady story allows him to see her transformation as plausible. If Tannakin can, indeed, be cursed with a monstrous appearance and then transforms after being married, she also becomes a loathly lady story. As Serina Patterson writes, "Tannakin, by referencing Gower, becomes an extension of the medieval loathly lady tales. . ." (291). She elaborates, "[The] author disrupts the boundary between fact and fiction: while he employs the pamphlet as a medium typically used to report facts, his use of Gower as part of a 'true history' situates Tannakin within the realm of fictions—or, as an early modern urban loathly lady" (302). So despite the lack of many of the narrative elements seen in the medieval loathly lady stories, due to her transformative, monstrous body and the direct correlation made between her and the medieval tradition, Tannakin is indeed a loathly lady.

### **Tannakin Skinker as a Horrific and Humorous Body**

As a loathly lady, Tannakin's body is a place of both horror and humor, as the readers both recoil and laugh at her monstrosity. Tannakin is described as having "all the limbes and lineaments of her body, well featur'd and proportioned, only her face, which is the ornament of beauty of all the rest, had the nose of a Hog or Swine: which was not only a stain and

blemish, but a deformed ugliness, making all the rest loathsome, contemptible and odious to all that lookt upon her in her infancie” (A3). Tannakin’s description in *A Certain Relation* is meant to be unsettling to the readers, as is exhibited not just by the supreme ugliness her face causes all the rest of her body to be but also the reaction of those who look upon her, including her parents. As the author writes, “If the joy of the Parents was great in the hope of a Childe, how much greater may wee conjecture their sorrowes were to be the parents of such a monster. . .” (A3). While some may have a face “only a mother could love,” even Tannakin’s parents are horrified by her appearance. The statement asks the readers to identify with her parents so to empathize with them and, as such, to see Tannakin as horrific since her parents themselves cannot rejoice in her birth. The readers then view her birth as equally horrific. So if the readers were to question whether a pig-faced lady is truly horrific, the author lays those thoughts to rest through identification with her parents. Furthermore, as a half-pig half-woman, she is a spatially hybrid monster and is subject to the same qualities of monstrosity and horror as Dame Ragnelle.

As exhibited in earlier loathly lady tales, these reactions reflect opinions on gender at the time. Given that Tannakin’s story is told primarily as news instead of as narrative, it is harder to pinpoint direct correlations between her behavior and stepping out of female roles, as her behavior is described in brief; however, a connection between gender and Tannakin’s monstrosity is seen as early as the reason the curse is placed on her. In *A Certain Relation*, the author writes:

It is credibly reported that this Burgers wife having conceived, an old woman suspected for a Witch, came to begge of her an almes, but she being busied about some necessary affaires gave her a short and neglectfull answer; at

which she went away muttering to her selfe the Divells *pater noster*, and was heard to say; *As the Mother is Hoggish, so Swinish shall be the Child shee goeth withall.* (B)

Typically, the monster is considered horrific because the ugly outside reflects an inner failing within the person. Here, Tannakin's appearance is not directly caused by her own transgression or personal faults but instead those of her mother. Her mother refused to exhibit the generosity typical of a true "gentlewoman" and instead hurriedly and greedily rushed the old woman away, and as such Tannakin must wear a face that exhibits her mother's true nature—"As the Mother is Hoggish, so Swinish shall be the Child shee goeth withall." Her mother refused to follow her duty as a woman of the higher classes and, as such, her daughter is punished. The fact that a woman's transgressions and a woman's curse both create the monstrous body reflects the same fear of women with power that is seen in the medieval analogues—the witch with her magical power and the mother with her financial power. Only two powerful women can bring about the horrific face of Tannakin Skinker.

Tannakin's own behavior appears to exhibit power as well. The author initially tells the readers that Tannakin cannot speak due to her hog head, and presents it as a benefit of marrying her; however, later he reveals: "[If] shee doth want any thing that shee hath a mind unto, bee it Apparrell or Dyet, she doth write her mind; and by that meanes, (as wee are given to understand, by those which have seene her) she hath all things to her desire" (B2). Initially, the readers are led to believe that Tannakin is silenced, as is desirable because then she cannot nag her husband, but then he discovers she can write. The act of writing represents a two-edge sword for potential husbands because not only does it mean that she is educated, but the author tells us that through writing "she hath all things to her desire."

Writing, then, seems almost a magical force in which Tannakin receives more than most women do through speaking, making it a subversive act. The explanation of her ability to communicate is amongst descriptions of her eating out of a silver trough, thus tying this act to her monstrous body and suggesting that there is an abnormal and horrific aspect in a woman that may get all that she desires.

As a woman who is normally formed from the neck down but has the head of a hog, Tannakin's sexuality is also a source of horror and monstrosity for the readers. The connection between her monstrosity and sexuality is most palpable in "A Monstrous Shape, Or A Shapeless Monster." Price writes:

She shews her pretty heele and foot  
 A dainty leg adioyning to't  
 Her stockins silk, if that will do't she cares not.  
 Her person person it is straight and tall  
 A lilly white hand, her fingers small  
 Makes her the handsomest wench of them all (lines 40-45)

It is a stanza later that he writes, "And to speak of her further grace / She hath / A dainty white swines face..." (lines 55-57). Price, in his description of Tannakin, chooses to shock the readers by describing her from the feet up, first presenting her as a sexual being before explaining that she is indeed monstrous. Not only is she a "normal" female body aside from her face, she is actually very sexually attractive. He starts with her ankles and legs, which were considered more sexual and scandalous than breasts during the Early Modern period, painting a picture of a woman that the readers will find very sexually attractive until he discovers her homely face. He also marks her sexuality by referring to her "golden purse."

Gniady writes: “Like Falstaff who muses over Mistress Page’s ‘purse’ and claims that she and Mistress Ford will be exchquers to him, it cannot be far from the readers’ minds (given that many ballads were quite bawdy) that the longing of a young men who should ‘not be too forward’ might not simply refer to Skinker’s dowry” (103). Price sets Tannakin up to not only be a monster, but one who is especially dangerous because of her sexual implications.

Sean Teuton writes on monstrosity:

[If] the Middle ages built around the distinction between human and animal the possibility for knowledge, as the distinction became internalized and self-knowledge became the goal, to the effect that humans began to perceive their own animalhood, then the distinction increasingly had to rely upon politics...Books of chivalry, as one of the key fictional genres of political ideology produced in nascent Spanish empire, illuminate a pivotal stage in monsters’ itinerary towards their central place in Thomas Hobbes, where they are presented as sovereignty itself. (118)

In his work on Spanish chivalry, he discovered a tie between the animal-human hybrid and a fear of bestiality/zoophilia. He writes of Spanish books of chivalry:

In the book of chivalry, the monster emerges when this uncontained physicality is duplicated into a transgressive morality. This excess inevitably takes shape through sexuality: excessive desire, frequently incest and especially zoophilia...Both characteristics must be present, excessive form and deformed morality, as if excessiveness has to occur at least twice for the monstrous to appear. (124)

In the case of the animal hybrid, and specifically Tannakin Skinker, the “twice-over” is then the matter in which she became hybrid and the nature of the person who might love her.

Tannakin’s animal and human features suggest that she was conceived out of the bestiality, making her at first sight a symbol of immorality and excessive desire, specifically the sexual desire of her mother. While the author of *A Certain Relation* speaks against this initial line of thinking by providing Tannakin with a cursed origin, it does not change the fact that Tannakin’s body, simply through its grotesque make-up, incites fear of what unhindered female desire may produce. There is also a fear of the implications of Tannakin’s own sexuality. By asking for a husband she inherently demands “the connubial rights that go along with marriage” that she may not necessarily have gotten otherwise given her loathsome appearance (103). As such, she is horrific and dangerous to her prospective suitors who would have to face her in the wedding bed. Furthermore, by lying with a woman who is, for all intents and purposes, half-pig, the man himself becomes a monster through the pseudo-bestiality. The choice the suitor makes is, then, similar to that of the knights in the medieval loathly lady tales. It asks if they can accept having a public life where he is viewed as perverse for having a hog as a wife, while having what will presumably be a fulfilling sex life? Because they do not have the option of marrying Tannakin and be viewed as acceptable to the public, to marry Tannakin means to choose a life of the private sphere should the curse not be broken through marriage. Tannakin’s sexuality is not just monstrous in its physical qualities but in its emasculating properties.

It is important to note that most scholars agree that the nature of “monstrosity” was changing during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as cultural interests shifted from away from religion. Tassie Gniady writes:

When looking at medieval and Renaissance monster-culture, the seventeenth century also marks a watershed moment in the perception of anomalous creatures. Previous understandings of the marvelous fail to hold, or are ‘cut out,’ as the realm of the monstrous moves out of the purview of religious prognostication and out from under the thumb of aristocratic collectors. Instead, cheap print brings monstrosity even to those who are unable to attend fairs and popularizes a new kind of secular monster whose implications are ‘open.’ (91)

She further remarks that “[the] seventeenth-century monster of cheap print functions more as entertainment: the economic success of broadsides is now aimed at drawing the audience in rather than pushing them away” (96). A key feature in “drawing the audience in” comes from comedy. Instead of a tone of condemnation comes one of laughter, and in examining that laughter we find that the seventeenth-century monster, and more specifically Tannakin Skinker, has more in common with its medieval predecessors, especially in terms of gender views. The humor surrounding Tannakin’s body in *A Certain Relation* and “A Monstrous Shape, or A Shapeless Monster” differs yet both are used to underscore the negative views of female strength and femininity thus demonstrated.

The humor in Price’s ballad originates in the same place its monstrosity does: by juxtaposing her sexuality with her horrific features. In describing her, Price ironically refers to her face as “dainty white swine’s face” and the fact that “men come a wooing,” but these are of course not truly the case as he later says her face is “not fit [for] a nurse” and the readers know that the only reason men are coming to see her is not to “woo” her but to collect on her dowry. However, he plays up these sexualized terms in order to emphasize the

ridiculousness of marrying such a creature and having to go to bed with her. Here the readers are laughing at the absurdity idea that her ugly appearance would be attractive to a man, laughing *at* her, therefore, reinforcing the notion that to see her as a sexual being is in itself grotesque, unthinkable, and possibly immoral.

In *A Certain Relation*, the humor is similar to that in “Tale of Florent” in that it comes from the suitors, unable to turn away such a large dowry, and how they justify the marrying a woman that they have heard is monstrous. The author writes:

One thinks with him selfe, so the body bee handsome, though her countenance bee never so course and ugly, all are alike in the night; and in the day time, put her head but in a blacke bagg, and what difference betwixt her and another woman. Another comforteth hum selfe thus: *That if shee cannot spake, shee cannot chide; and therefore hee shall be sure not to have a scold to his wife.* Another apprehends, *That if shee feede but one wash and the like, shee will not be very chargeable to him for her Dyet: and therefore he shall have a good bargaine by the match.* (B1)

The humor in the above passage is palpably tied to her monstrous body as the suitors twist her malformed face into positives that may make her a wife as they turn her inability to speak into an inability to “chide” and her hoggish dietary habits into hoping that feeding her will be cheap. In the scenario, the readers, who have already been invited to think of themselves as potential suitors, are not identifying with Tannakin and laughing at the absurdity of the suitors’ thoughts of what being a true “gentlewoman” entails, but rather identify with the suitors and are laughing at their failed attempts to turn a negative into a positive (these attempts are, indeed, failed because none of the suitors actually follow through with marrying

Tannakin after they see her unveiled). The readers can relate to how awful marrying a pig would be and performing mental gymnastics in order to justify marrying her for the money. Furthermore, each justification reveals an underlying negative thought about a powerful woman. An unideal wife would speak her mind or demand to be fed well but the suitors' misconception is that Tannakin would do neither, which is later disproven as it is revealed that she can write. By laughing at the suitors' coming to terms with her grotesque body, the readers are then laughing at both the horrific face of Tannakin and the outrageousness of women who make demands on their husbands. Thus, the humorous body of Tannakin Skinker simply reinforces the negative female concepts that her monstrosity introduced; however, as we will see in *Penelope*, humor and monstrosity can both be used to reinforce positive messages about women.

### **The Differing Nature of Horror and Humor in *Penelope***

If Tannakin Skinker represents a watershed between the medieval and early modern monster, *Penelope* represents a watershed between the modern day monster and its predecessors. *Penelope* is a 21<sup>st</sup> century film adaptation of the hog-faced gentlewoman. *Penelope* was released in 2006 with mixed critical reception and features Cristina Ricci in the titular role as well as James McAvoy and Reese Whitherspoon in the supporting cast. In the film, *Penelope*'s family is cursed that their next daughter will have the face of a pig after her great-great-great-grandfather impregnates a peasant out of wedlock and then refuses to marry her, resulting in her suicide. The curse can only be broken by marrying "one of her kind," which is interpreted to mean a nobleman. It takes generations for the family to have another girl and when they do it is in modern-day England, with the birth of *Penelope*. Unable to accept her appearance and the attention it gives them, her family fakes her death and locks

her away in the manor, waiting until she comes of age when they invite suitors to the home to court her through a double-sided mirror. All of the noble suitors run away and are caught and given gag orders to sign, except Edward who runs to tell the police about the pig-faced woman (none of whom believe him). He hooks up with a reporter—Lemon—who wants a picture of her, and they find someone who they believe to be a down and out nobleman—Max, who is really John—to court her and snap a picture once he sees her. He does so, but by the time John gets a picture he has fallen in love with her and refuses to sell it to them. Penelope asks John to marry her, but he refuses without telling her it's because he can't break the curse. Distraught, Penelope decides to see the world and escapes the house, wearing a scarf to cover her nose. She is soon discovered as a pig-woman but instead of being shunned she becomes a celebrity. Edward continues to claim that Penelope is a fearful monster and him and his family begin to lose favor with the public. To save face, Edward asks Penelope to marry him, but she says “no” at the altar, realizing that she doesn't want to change because she likes herself. The epiphany of her own self-worth breaks the curse, and she finds John and kisses him.

At its heart, *Penelope* plays with the idea of monstrosity rather than adheres to it, as is apparent by Penelope's appearance. While she is grotesque in that she has exaggerated physical features, her appearance is not nearly as monstrous as that of Tannakin Skinker. Penelope's curse gives her a pig-nose and pig ears, which are covered by her hair in all scenes of her as an adult, while Tannakin has a whole pig's head. The softened pig features make her more relatable to the





viewers than Tannakin's pig head, but she is still viewed as monstrous by the characters, as demonstrated by the montage of men jumping out of windows to escape her, her mother's inability to cope with her appearance, and Edward's trauma upon seeing her face. So while the viewers may

not see her as particularly monstrous, the universe in which she exists does, allowing the film to challenge the viewers' ideas and definitions of monstrosity.

Furthermore, while monstrosity typically indicates inner failings or personal transgression of the monster, Penelope's figure does not reflect her own faults or failings as a woman. As a character Penelope is presented as sweet, polite, and generally likeable—a true “gentlewoman”. She is an intelligent and well-educated woman, but it is not presented as subversive but rather normalized. Penelope the narrator says that her mother was sure to keep up her education in order that she would one day make a good wife over clips of her learning to write, speak other languages, and play music. Her education is then a desirable trait for women and marriage in contrast to Tannakin's writing which gives her the ability to nag and make demands. Furthermore, the public doesn't shun her or her personality. Before she is revealed as having a pig's nose Penelope has no problems making friends, as her first night she goes on her adventures with a moped-riding peer. Once she is discovered, the public adores her, as paparazzi follow her around and she becomes a popular Halloween costume for children. John backs out of the deal with Lemon and Edward because “she's not what Edward says she was” (*Penelope*). In other words, she is not a monster. While characters

who focus on her physical appearance find her frightening, people who get to know her, or want to get to know her, personally do not, demonstrating a disconnect between her monstrous outside appearance and who she is as a person.

Instead of Penelope's monstrosity being a physical mark of her strong feminine personality, it represents her inability to accept herself, nose and all. Early in the film she constantly refers to her nose as "not my nose" or "not me." When she gets disheartened by the suitors and needs to remember the importance of breaking the curse, she repeats the following phrase taught to her by her mother: "It's not my face; it's my great-great-great-grandfather's face. He's not me, and I'm not him, and I'm not me" (*Penelope*). She is unable to accept her nose as being a part of her, but the lack of acceptance of one part of her physical appearance turns into an existential breakdown as she states, "I'm not me," revealing an inability to accept who she is as a person as well. The use of the double-sided mirror to talk to her suitors exacerbates the personal divide she sees between her personal appearance and her self. She uses the mirror so that she may be able to get to know her suitors without them seeing her pig nose, her train of thought being that if they can get to know her, not her great-great-great-grandfather's nose, then she will be able to marry. Not only does her decision further demonstrate her inability to accept her face as it is, but it also shows that her personality and her face are indivisible prior to the curse being broken. The suitors always run after seeing her face, regardless of how they felt about her before, because it is a part of who she is and is not so easily separated from her true self as Penelope would like to believe. The curse is then broken once she states "I like myself the way I am" because then the personal insecurities that the face represents have been dismantled and the monstrosity cannot hold.

Given that the story is one of acceptance, it is then the characters who cannot accept her who are viewed as the true monsters in the movie. Edward is positioned as the villain of the film and is the character who struggles most with accepting Penelope's appearance. He sweet talks Penelope until she shows her face, after which he screams and runs away. When he goes to the police he describes her as a more typical monster, with deep creases in her



face, a scowl, and fangs. He also later has a “flashback” where he sees her face in a van window, but it is not her actual face. Instead he sees the one he described to the police,

growling at him and bearing her fangs. Even when he agrees to marry her, he is seen holding back gags at the altar. His exaggerated reaction to monstrosity is a result of his discomfort with who she is; however, it works to his disadvantage once she is discovered by the public. Despite her mother's earlier fear of ostracization, the general public welcomes Penelope with open arms and turns her into a celebrity. When Edward is interviewed about her at this point in the narrative, he says, “That girl—that thing—belongs in a cage” to which a reporter off-screen audibly says “what a creep.” He then agrees to marry her in order to save face, and Lemon calls the couple “Penelope and the beast.” It is not Penelope that everyone sees as monstrous, but Edward because of his mistreatment of her based on her appearance, emphasizing that monstrosity comes from rejecting her pig-face.

Similarly, the humor in the story comes from the other characters' overreaction at her face, most prominently from her mother. When talking about the curse, Penelope says,

“Nobody suffered more than my mother” and it is this “suffering” that her mother goes through due to the curse that a large portion of the humor in the movie comes from. Instead of showing Penelope a traditional non-judgmental mother’s love, she is the most adamant of any of the characters in getting rid of the nose. The first scene with her shows her screaming at her daughter’s face, shortly before taking her to a plastic surgeon to get the nose “fixed,” which she discovers is impossible due to a major, inoperable vein that runs through it. She is so unable to handle public interest over her daughter’s odd appearance that she fakes her death. Furthermore, it is Penelope’s mother who teaches her the nonsensical mantra about her nose, saying, “You are not your nose. You are not you. You are somebody else.” Unlike Tannakin Skinker, though, the viewers do not laugh at these scenes because they think the mother is relatable or understandable. Because the story is told by Penelope and her monstrosity has been toned down and connected to self-judgment, the viewers relate to Penelope. They believe that her mother should love her and not make outlandish attempts to undo what she sees as her problematic nose. As such, in laughing they acknowledge how absurd the mother’s reaction truly is, thus highlighting the story as being one about the importance of acceptance of self and those who are different.

As loathly ladies, both Tannakin Skinker and Penelope use the duality of grotesque bodies in order to make a statement about women in their time periods. However, as time goes on, the message of these stories change. While Tannakin Skinker follows in the footsteps of the Medieval tradition and reflects a negative view of female power, *Penelope* takes an entirely different path in both its use of monstrosity and comedy in order to promote female self-acceptance.

### Chapter 3: The Humorous and Horrific Witch

Feminist scholars have already analyzed Stephen Sondheim's well-received musical *Into the Woods*. In his scathing essay "Back(lash) *Into the Woods*: Putting Women Back into Their Place," Peter Wood argues that the women of *Into the Woods*, particularly the Witch and the Baker's Wife, are caricatures of the negative representations of feminists in the feminist backlash literature of the 1980's. He writes:

*Into the Woods* has obviously enchanted many people with its fairy tale world, tightly crafted script, and wonderful music. [However,] I would argue that the show is not 'unthreatening' but that by threatening feminist notions of desire and equality, the play takes into its dark and "woody" heart the message of a backlash discourse that was highly prevalent in the popular culture of the time. (148).

Wood's point is not unfounded. The play does indeed seem to have women transgress standard gender roles only for them to be punished for it later. For example, the Baker's Wife dies shortly after having an affair with Prince Charming, an act that Wood argues "reveal[s] the play's distrust of feminism and female desire" (139). When closely examining the Witch, Wood's postulation becomes even stronger. She is a woman who is simultaneously powerful and hideous, placing her as a monstrous figure within the text. She controls much of the action of the play and contains magic, positioning her as a strong female lead and the combination of her power and her grotesque appearance makes the other characters in the

play uncomfortable, confirming Wood's suspicion that the play is skeptical of the strong and powerful woman. However, what Wood's does not consider is the role that laughter plays in *Into the Woods*. When looking at monstrosity and humor in the character development of the Witch, it becomes clear that while the Witch uses many medieval ideas of monstrosity and womanhood, laughter is used to poke fun at these same notions. I will make my point by looking at the Witch through the lens of the medieval motif of the loathly lady. The Witch has all of the distinguishing features of a loathly lady, and given that loathly ladies are also characters that are marked by a grotesque visage and complicated by their roles as both comedic and monstrous, it seems neglectful to address these issues without also addressing her role as a loathly lady.

### ***Into the Woods and The Witch as a Loathly Lady***

Sondheim's musical first premiered on Broadway on November 5, 1987<sup>5</sup> and tells the story of a Baker and his wife who are trying to conceive a child but cannot. Their neighbor, The Witch, comes to see them with a deal. She reveals that the Baker's father had stolen her beans, so she cursed his family with infertility but can lift the curse as long as they can give her a set of items "in three midnights." All four of these items are recognizable as belonging to fairy tale characters, such as "the cape as red as blood" and "the slippers as pure as gold." The couple then goes on a journey *Into the Woods*, running into classic fairy tale characters, such as Rapunzel, and in many cases helping them come to their traditional fairy tale endings, for example by giving Jack the beans in exchange for his cow. By the end of the first act, all the fairy tales have come to their conclusions and everyone has received what they wished for, including the Baker and the Baker's Wife who successfully find the items in

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<sup>5</sup> I am referring to a recording of the 1987 Broadway show.

time for the Witch to lift the curse. The second act opens with all the characters living out the lives they wanted; only now they have more wishes. As they lament their new desires a crash is heard, and it is revealed that the wife of the giant that Jack killed as come for revenge. In this act, several of the main characters die, such as Jack's mother, Red Riding Hood's Grandmother, Rapunzel, and the Baker's wife. Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Jack, and the Baker then devise a plan together to kill the giant's wife. The plan works, and they are seen together at the end building new lives for themselves.

In proceeding with my argument, it is first important to define the Witch as a loathly lady. In the introduction to their essay collection *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries Tradition*, S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter write that the loathly lady is "that shape-shifter who is loathsome at first, and at last is lovely to all..." (xiii). As indicated in their quote, a key aspect of the loathly lady is that she is a woman who is put under a spell to give her the appearance of a hag, and by the end of the tale is turned back into a beautiful, young woman, and the transformative nature of the loathly lady is palpable in both traditions. The Witch is also transformative in the above manner, spending the majority of the first act (and more than half the play) as the stereotypical fairytale hag before removing her stage make up and revealing herself as the beautiful Bernadette Peters.

However, there are other motifs that serve to define the loathly lady, and the Witch displays these as well. Passmore claims in her essay:

The theme of instruction and advice, however, connects the Irish and English narratives as strongly as the visual motif of the Loathly Lady...The counselor role of the Loathly Lady is determined by the readiness of the protagonist to attain kingship, whether that be interpreted literally or symbolically. She

offers ‘formative instruction’ to the exemplary Irish protagonist and  
 ‘transformative advice’ to the imperfect English protagonist. (3)

Given that one of the major roles of the loathly lady is to serve as a guide for a male protagonist, it can also be said that in the loathly lady tale the protagonist must follow through with her advice in order to acquire his own desires. The Irish tales are straightforward in this manner: the prince must give the hag her kiss in order to become king of Ireland. However, in the English tales, the matter works on both the protagonists’ immediate and long-term desires. By giving into the loathly lady’s wish to marry, he is successfully escaping punishment for his crimes, but also, by taking her answer of “sovereignty” to heart, he can have a beautiful wife.

Narratively, *Into the Woods* follows much of the same structure, focusing largely on the desires of the characters. In the first act, the action and motive are driven by the characters wishes. The first lyrical lines of the play are “I wish...” and the play largely works to interrogate the value of wishes and their fulfillment. As a tree tells Cinderella as she asks for a dress to wear to the ball “Do you know what you wish? / Are you certain what you wish is what you want? / If you know what you want, then make a wish” . The main male protagonist of the story is The Baker. The wish of the Baker and the Baker’s Wife is the bear a child, while the wish of the Witch is to be young and beautiful again. These desires become intermingled as the Witch tells the couple she will grant their wish:

You wish to have the curse reversed?

I’ll need a certain potion first.

Go to the woods and bring me back:

One: the cow as white as milk,

Two: the cape as red as blood,

Three: the hair as yellow as corn

Four: the slipper as pure as gold.

At first glance, the Witch's role as counselor appears to reflect the Irish tradition more than the English, as she is not offering the Baker a life lesson but rather is simply giving him a set of tasks to follow to fulfill his desires. Just as the Irish loathly lady is the gatekeeper for kingship and the man must follow her orders in order to reach his ambitions, the Witch, as the one who cursed his family, is the gatekeeper for the Baker's wish and in order to have his wish he must follow her specific and obtuse instructions. The Baker and the Baker's Wife's quest to find the objects becomes the major story arc for the first act despite the fact that they do not understand or know why the Witch wants the items they are seeking, just as the man in the Irish loathly lady tradition grants her request without understanding the greater implications of his actions. However, it is later revealed that the items that the Witch has requested will turn her young and beautiful again, thus her wishes and desires become intertwined with that of the Baker. Her motive for providing counsel is then not a selfless endeavor to help the male protagonist but becomes a symbiotic act. In the same way it is imperative for the English loathly lady that the male protagonist learns the importance of female sovereignty as the sovereignty he provides her is the only way in which she may be freed from her curse. Thus, the Witch's counsel reflects both the English and the Irish loathly lady tradition.

The issue of counsel and male desire ties into the third aspect of the loathly lady I wish to focus on: its connection to lineage. As Carter states, "[The] ideas that shape the motif's unstable flesh are about kingship, that is, about male power, masculinity and royal

lineage” (83). The issues of kingship and lineage are practically nonexistent in the English retellings (although in one tale the quest is in order to protect King Arthoure), but they are an inherent aspect of the Irish narrative as it focuses on national rather than personal sovereignty. Furthermore, the men in this instance are unable to continue the royal line by taking their place as king of Ireland without the help of the loathly lady. As seen earlier, the issue of lineage is imperative to the narrative of Penelope as well as she inherits her monstrosity from her great-grandfather. The Witch is also strongly connected to lineage. She is positioned as the one who has the power to both destroy and renew the lineage of the Baker, having cursed his father so that his “...family tree / would always be / a barren one.” It is noteworthy that in the above description of the curse the Witch does not focus on issues of relationships and pregnancy but rather those of progeny and lineage by using the imagery of the family tree as the vehicle through which to discuss his barrenness. The issue is not that the Baker wishes to raise a child, but rather that the Baker wishes to continue his family line, a point that is underscored by his uneasiness in taking care of the newborn in act two. The Witch further connects herself to lineage by being a mother figure. However, just as she has taken away the Baker’s future progeny, her figure as a mother also works to disrupt the concept of lineage in a way that the Irish tales do not in that her daughter is not of blood relation to her. Rather she is a child that the Witch has stolen.

### **The Witch as Grotesque and Monstrous**

Spending half of their narrative lives as hags, the loathly ladies also serve as a grotesque fiction in literature, and thus the Witch does as well. Bakhtin coined the term “grotesque realism” in which “images of the body are offered...in an extremely exaggerated form” (18). Modern scholars Justin Edwards and Rune Grauland further build on the earlier

definition of the exaggerated body by suggesting that qualities of the grotesque include

“peculiar, odd, absurd, bizarre,

macabre, depraved, [and]

perverse” and later draw a

strong connection between the

bodily grotesque and

deformity/monstrosity (1). The

English loathly lady is situated

as a grotesque figure, with some



tales accentuating these qualities more than others. As a play, *Into the Woods* does not have

the same luxury of hinting at grotesque elements and letting the readers fill in what

“grotesque” truly means, as is the case with the foul, old wife of Chaucer. While the

Broadway Witch is not quite as animalistic as Dame Ragnelle as all of her teeth are inside

her mouth and she is not seen dining with her fingernails, the production is not shy in its

portrayal of her as a grotesque figure, and she is truly an exaggerated model of aging and

deformity.

Her hair is not only gray, but large and frazzled; her nose and fingers are crooked and

elongated; her eyebrows are bushy and protruding, often flopping around as she moves her

head; she has a hunched back; and her skin is not only wrinkled, but covered in warts and

what appear to be scabs. It is true that many of these qualities are typical of the portrayal of

the Witch, but the extreme to which the production went in order to present her as grotesque

becomes clear when comparing Bernadette Peter’s Witch to that of Meryl Steep in the film

adaptation.

While the film still presents her with claw-like fingernails and elongated fingers, her face virtually lacks grotesque features.

Rather, based on the face alone, the Witch is merely an aged and wide-eyed



Meryl Steep, perhaps what she might look like if she makes it to 100. There are no other blemishes or warts, her nose is normally proportioned, and her eyebrows perfectly manicured. Furthermore, her hair, while tousled and gray, is only as messy as if she'd neglected brushing it for a week, paling in comparison to Bernadette Peter's towering, ratty mane. As such, we can see that Bernadette Peter's appearance is purposefully grotesque and not simply a recreation of a standard witch figure.

The primary significance of the Witch's, and in general loathly ladies', grotesque appearance is that it marks them as monstrous figures. Monsters are figures seen as somehow inhuman who make those who encounter them uncomfortable and often scared because of their inability to be categorized. Dana Oswald defines a monster as "an outlier within its race of 'kind,' whether that kin-group is human or animal. The monster is always read against the bodies of those who are not monstrous—the so-called 'normal' humans or 'normal' animals" (2). Thomas Fahy presents a similar explanation as he writes, "Monsters... elicit the

emotional effect that the genre seeks—horror—because they literally embody the abnormal” (60). Furthermore, Oswold argues that monstrosity is first signified by the body, as it is “primarily a physical and visible category” (5). She writes, “[Monstrous] bodies are those that exceed human norms. Physical norms, however, are not built on subtle difference, but rather visible ones—ones that help a community decide who fits the norm and who exceeds it” (3).

As I have already demonstrated, loathly ladies as a whole, and the Witch specifically, clearly go out of the bounds of what is considered “normal” in societal terms. The monstrous body is deeply steeped in issues regarding gender politics. Sarah Alison Miller writes of Medieval thought:

Female bodies are monstrously out of bound “by nature” (where “nature: does not imply nature at all but a set of assumptions and prescriptions by which Medieval authorities define women and their bodies)...Late-medieval representation of female corporeality bear out these claims. *De secretis mulierum* is supremely concerned with the signs of monstrosity in female urine, blood, menstrual fluid, and menstrual vapors, and the way in which these seepages may deceive or harm men and infants. (5)

As Miller’s observation demonstrates, the female body is already signified with suspicion and monstrosity. Defining the “normal” body as male, the female body then becomes abnormal by its very nature, making its normal functions such as urinating and menstruation suddenly “monstrous.” It may seem initially unfair to apply these same points of view to the Witch as they refer to the Middle Ages and *Into the Woods* was produced in 1987, but, as already established, the Witch draws upon a trope in Medieval literature and folklore, making



scholarship on Medieval women an appropriate lens through which to look at the character. As such, viewers are unnerved by the grotesque body of the Witch not simply because of its abnormality from the human body but because of her femininity. Furthermore, the viewers find her appearance much more monstrous than they would a man with the same grotesque appearance

because she is already marked by monstrosity

The Witch's transformation into a "normal" beautiful woman later in the play only works to underscore the connection between the Witch's womanhood and her monstrosity as she exhibits the traits of Carroll's temporal hybridity. Thomas Fahy writes of the monstrous figures in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* "The horror...resides within [the characters]. Just like a serial killer who seems like a nice guy to his neighbors, werewolves 'hide' inside human beings until a full moon; vampires can 'pass' as human until they reveal their fangs" (61). While Fahy is referring to monsters who "pass as human," what we see with the Witch is in some sense an ideological inversion of his idea. The Witch's grotesque and monstrous façade only serves to mask what it is that we are truly afraid of: the woman that resides inside of her. In fact, the appearance of the Witch after she transforms into at the end of act one is not just young but also the ideal of feminine beauty. She is a petit woman with smooth, pale skin and full, contoured red lips. She wears an elegant, beaded pale pink dress that is low-cut

with a halter top in order to accentuate her cleavage. Furthermore, the dress is mermaid style, hugging her body to the ankles, thus displaying her natural feminine curves. In the same way the cut of the dress brings the viewers' attention to her breasts, the bustle of tulle draws their eyes to her hips. Her hair is still curly, but not only is it now auburn, but the curls are tightly done-up in a manner that would have been considered flattering for the 1980's big-hair crowd. Similarly, the sparkly, poufy sleeves reflect fashion trends of the time period, being reminiscent of Princess Diana's wedding gown. Just as the stage production meticulously made the Witch's monstrous appearance as grotesque as possible, after her transformation, it makes the Witch as beautiful and alluring for their audience as it can. As already stated, her transformation indicates that what we really find horrific about the Witch is her womanhood; however, the fact that she transforms into the ideal woman figure suggests that even at their best, women are still monstrous. However, Fahy's statement about the monstrosity within also alludes to the idea that there is more to monstrosity than simply a monstrous body: monstrous acts.

Monstrous actions are similar to monstrous bodies (and monstrosity as a whole) in that they are defined by societal norms. But when discussing the normality of actions, socio-political issues are often brought to the surface. Monstrous acts are no different. Dana Oswald writes,

While physical aberration is the primary attribute of monstrosity, deviant behavior can serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity. Monstrous behaviors help to make the monster as a cultural as well as physical other.

Some such behaviors include habits of eating, grooming and dress, reactions

to human approach, use of human language, and transgressing gender roles.

(6)

While several of the loathly ladies mentioned exhibit several or all of the monstrous acts that Oswald gives us, such as Dame Ragnelle's unusual steak-eating etiquette, the Witch primarily performs only one of these actions: "the transgressing of gender roles."

One example of the way in which The Witch holds power over male protagonist of the play is her relationship with the Baker. As I mentioned earlier, the Witch is connected to the Baker's lineage as she holds the key to his fertility. However, looking at the scene through gender politics yields different results. Lineage and fertility is historically connected to manhood, given the importance of having a son in many legal issues, especially that of maintaining sovereignty over a kingdom. The Witch alludes to the issue of lineage and kingship in telling the Baker and the Baker's Wife about cursing his father for stealing beans from her garden, as she ends by singing,

But I'm telling you the same I tell kings and queens ,

Don't ever never ever mess around with my greens.

Especially the beans!

Here she draws a direct connection between the choice of her curse and royalty, indicating that the play also values fertility as a mark of being a good patriarch. Wood also notes that there was an increasing cultural connection between fatherhood and masculinity during the time the *Into the Woods* was first produced, as indicated by other popular media at the time. He writes, "[One] of the principle concerns of movies like *Three Men and a Baby* was a common concern with family, responsibility, and fatherhood as markers of what truly makes a man. The Baker's desire for a child is entirely of a piece with the discourse of masculinity

at the time” (146). As such, the Baker’s masculine identity is closely knotted in his ability to produce a child. Therefore, the Witch’s first monstrous act is that she has flipped the traditional gender hierarchy, but also that she has hurt the Baker’s ability to reach his full potential as a man. The positioning of her actions as monstrous then implies that the play values a traditional societal structure that follows traditional gender roles. She then exploits the advantage that she has over the Baker in order to achieve her own personal goals. Another affect that the aforementioned scene has is that it connects the Witch’s power with her magic. After all, it is her magic that allows her to exploit the Baker, as emphasized when “the Witch [jabs] her magic stick towards the Baker,” connecting his infertility to her magic, and thus her magic to the authority she has over him (Wood 141).

The Baker and the Baker’s wife are not the only characters whose fates the Witch has control over though. It is her needs and desires that act as the driving force for the action in the first act. By sending the Baker on a quest for the specific items recognizable fairytale items he is sent to find them, she entangles the lives and storylines of the six characters. Her interference is the reason that the audience sees interactions between fairytale characters that typically exist in separate universes. The newly forged connection between the disconnected fairytale characters also means that they end up needing each other to fulfill their traditional destinies. For example, Jack only climbs up the beanstalk to prove to Little Red Riding Hood that he is not lying about the singing golden harp in the sky. As such in the first act of the play, the fates or “happy endings” for the characters are rooted in the Witch’s own personal goals and desires.

Furthermore, the Witch is also positioned as the marker of time. The first act is structured around the three midnights that the Baker and the Baker’s Wife has to fulfill their

task. The structure of the play, then, is also dictated by the desires of the Witch. As audience members, we know the passage of time through a series of songs that open with the Witch announcing how many midnights are now “gone.” Thus, the audience itself is also at the hands of the Witch, depending on her to fully understand the movement of the play.

It is important to note that the Witch’s monstrous body and her monstrous actions through the transgression of gender norms do not exist as separate entities defining her as grotesque but instead are inextricably linked, as is evident when she transforms. After her physical transformation she is no longer set aside as abnormal and monstrous but rather is assimilated immediately into the community, as indicated by the last song of act one “Ever After.” While in previous group songs, the Witch never joined the group but instead was kept on the outskirts of the scene, during “Ever After” she is downstage with the other character singing along, even holding the waists of the Wicked Step Sisters for a trio. However, the assimilation also means a loss of power for the Witch as she also ceases to be a critical figure in the audiences understanding of the action. The trend continues into the second act as the Witch is no longer the axis along which the rest of the action spins but rather is as lost, scared, and confused as the other characters in the play. Furthermore, in regaining her beauty, the Witch lost her magic, which was the source of much of her societal power. The lyrics to the Broadway revival version of the song “Last Midnight,” which differ slightly from the original, suggest that her beauty and her magic cannot coexist, as she laments: “better ugly and spurned with my powers returned.” Thus, the play seems to suggest that it is impossible for a woman to maintain power and not be monstrous. However, when looking at the humorous nature of the grotesque and the way it works within the play the conclusions differ.

### **Laughing at the Witch**

The comedic aspect of the musical is an important one to keep in mind given that, as Joanne Gilbert writes, “[Humor] may empower the powerless, may invert and subvert the status quo and, in doing so, may make the dominant culture uncomfortable. Humor is inextricably linked to power” (xv). One of the primary characteristics of the Witch is her grotesque body, and the grotesque is a concept which often links the horrific with the humorous. As such, it would be unfair to analyze the monstrosity of the Witch’s grotesqueness without also acknowledging its comedic aspects. When looking at humor in relation to her grotesque body, I will question whether or not it has the ability to undo the misogynistic undertones of her monstrosity in thoroughly questioning the nature of the audience’s laughter.

One of the earliest instances of the Witch’s grotesque nature being presented as humorous is during the scene when the Witch tells the Baker and the Baker’s Wife about the curse. She is singing her story and says, “I should’ve laid a spell on him right there. Could have turned him into a dog or a chair or a sn-“ but before she is able to finish her sentence she begins seizing up and repeating the noise “sn-sn-sn-sn.” The Baker and the Baker’s Wife begin to panic but are too scared of her to offer to help so instead they alternate between frantically watching her and looking away in discomfort. The Witch then proceeds to continue with her song as if nothing happened. Watching the recording of the play, the laughter from the audience is audible throughout the scene. However, what are the audience members laughing at? The question is an important one because, as Gilbert states:

Clearly in order for a person to laugh at a joke, she or he must first either identify or dis-identify with the teller or the target (who in some cases may be

one and the same). When we hear a joke, we may laugh because we have found ourselves in a similar situation or we may laugh because the target (and/or teller) is so obviously unlike us. (11)

Thus the cultural implications of the joke change drastically depending on who the audience is identifying or dis-identifying with. While Gilbert is referring to stand-up comedy, the process is the same in a comedic stage performance. There are characters within the scene that the audience identifies with and there are characters he dis-identifies with. Since the Witch is marked as an abnormal, monstrous other, the characters that the audience naturally identifies with is the Baker and the Baker's Wife. As such, the audience is simultaneously laughing at how absurd the Witch's actions are and how terrified and over-the-top the Baker and the Baker's Wife react. While the first can easily be interpreted as following along the same sort of problematic thinking as the Witch's monstrosity by poking fun at her grotesque nature, the second offers a more careful nuance. By identifying with the Baker and the Baker's Wife and then laughing about how their fear of the Witch paralyzes them, the audience is in turn laughing at their own discomfort of the Witch, thus opening up to the possibility of societal and cultural critique. Furthermore, by identifying with the Baker and the Baker's Wife, the audience turns their reaction into the butt of the joke. After all, if the Witch was seizing up and the Baker and the Baker's Wife reacted normally to the situation then the scene would cease to be funny but rather dramatic and frightening.

Another scene which situates the Witch's grotesque qualities as humorous is after her transformation, when she goes to Rapunzel to try to restore their relationship. The Witch sees Rapunzel in the woods with her twin babies and the Witch approaches her, but since she is newly transformed, Rapunzel doesn't recognize her. Realizing the issue, the Witch hunches

her back and scrunches up her face in order to appear more grotesque. The last ditch effort is successful, and Rapunzel recognizes her but rejects her offer for reconciliation. Just like the above example, at first glance it appears that the joke is poking fun at the Witch's grotesque figure, and honestly it is. However, in the scene, it is the Witch who is poking fun at her own grotesque quality, so the moment falls under the category of self-deprecatory humor. Gilbert states that self-deprecatory jokes are an important aspect of the humor of marginalized groups. She writes of stand-up comedian Phyllis Diller:

Self-deprecatory humor may be construed as cultural critique, and the comics who use self-deprecatory material do not necessarily believe themselves to be the personas they project onstage...Although initially self-deprecatory material may appear demeaning (toward herself and/or women in general), a closer scrutiny reveals that Diller's jokes accomplish what all marginal humor accomplishes—it calls cultural values into question by lampooning them (140).

Gilbert's argument, then, is that if the comedian does not identify with the negative stereotypes surrounding her but performs those stereotypes in the name of laughter, she is bringing to the surface the stereotypes to her audience in order to open them up for cultural critique. The Witch does not identify herself with the grotesque as she tells Rapunzel, "This is who I truly am." Furthermore, in this scene it is the Witch, not Rapunzel, whom the audience is identifying with as they sympathize with her when Rapunzel refuses to make amends. As such, in laughing at the Witch's actions they are not laughing at her former monstrosity but rather laughing at Rapunzel's inability to see her as anything other than

monstrous. Thus the Witch, in the eyes of the audience, is never solely a monster but instead a complex and misunderstood person.

While laughter does not erase the misogyny underlying the Witch's monstrosity, it does give us new eyes through which to look at the implications of those moments. In seeing that the Witch's grotesque body can also be a vehicle of cultural critique through the use of humor, we are forced to reconsider her moments of monstrosity. While the Witch may be the "monster" of the first act, this half of the play is still light-hearted and filled with laughter. However, in the second act, during which the Witch is portrayed as an idyllic beauty the whole time, the play turns dark. A true monster appears who kills or precipitates the deaths of several of the primary characters. The characters who live are left to redefine their lives now that their fairytale endings have crumbled. In short, with the absence of the strong, subversive, and, yes, monstrous Witch, everything falls apart. In light of this re-visioning of the work, Wood's argument begins to seem less stable. While there are still critiques to be made about the characterization of the Baker's Wife and the fact that the monster in the second act is a promiscuous *female* giant, the Witch does not appear to fall into the same category. She may be monstrous but through humor she calls into question what her monstrosity really means. Furthermore, without her monstrosity, no one can get their happy endings.

## Conclusion

This thesis is a cross-section of how gender is reflected across time. The loathly lady is an important figure in examining such a relationship as her transformation into an ordinary, even extraordinary, female body gives her the possibility of redemption. In seeing how the loathly lady is narratively treated before and after her transformation can give great insight into how the narrative views her value as a strong female. Furthermore, I do not focus solely on the medieval loathly lady in order to examine how the stories themselves transform over different periods. While the monstrosity in older texts present feminine subversion as a negative quality, later ones have a more complicated relationship with the monstrous, offering the viewers a more positive outlook on powerful femininity.

However, these later texts are also in a visual, rather than print, medium, a fact that cannot be ignored in this discussion as these narratives depend on character identification in order to influence the readers or viewers. In the case of *Penelope*, the ability to see her does morph the viewer identification from Tannakin Skinker as the director portrays her as a normal girl with a few pig-like features. While the readers are left to their own imaginations how disturbing Tannakin's hog-face might be, with Penelope the choice has been made for them and the answer is not that disturbing at all. However, the monstrosity is not always toned between print and visual texts, as demonstrated when comparing *The Witch* to Chaucer's loathly lady. Therefore, the change in viewer/reader identification seems more aligned with changing times than it does with change in medium. Just as "monster-culture"

and the treatment of monsters shifts between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, we see a more complex understanding of monstrosity when comparing both of these earlier versions to modern-day examples. While the face of the monster has changed very little, its cultural underpinnings have evolved significantly.

While I do wish to broaden scholarly discussion of the loathly lady to include more contemporary figures, I also desire to deepen scholarly discussion of humor. However, laughter is an important factor to consider in any study of medieval literature, especially in analyzing how an archetype may have changed over time. As D'arcens writes:

Comic representations of the medieval past have abounded in Western culture. From the earliest parodies of medieval chivalry such as Chaucer's *Tale of Sire Thopas*, with its misfiring hero and its misfiring hero and its floundering narrative, though to the scatological 'gross-out' humour of contemporary children's history books, the pedagogic parody of televisual 'jocummentary', or the post-modern ironic stance of comic heritage tourism, as long as there has been medievalism, people have been encouraged to laugh at, with and in the Middle Ages. This comic Middle Ages, as I will go on to demonstrate, is not simply a series of responses to a temporal period, but rather is better characterized as the ongoing comic (re)formulation of ideas about the Middle Ages based on a cluster of practices, rituals, beliefs, people and events that have come to be constituted as quintessentially 'medieval.'

Thus it is with humor that we as modern audiences connect with our medieval past. A 21<sup>st</sup> century audience understands the middle ages, their symbols and archetype, as is apparent by the popularity of movies such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. As such, to

understand how a motif has changed when placed into a modern context it is imperative to also understand how the humor functions. In *Into the Woods*, the audience may not laugh at the Witch but then what *are* they laughing at? They are left to laugh with her at the medieval motif and all the problematic baggage it carries. Furthermore, to understand this baggage, the humor must be examined in the medieval context as well. As D'arcens remarks, the issue is not simply about laughing "at" the middle ages, but laughing "in" it as well.

Similarly, I wish to introduce the concept of the comic monster to scholarship and hope to begin discussion on the humor as well as horror that comes along with the monstrous. Recent scholarship discusses what it is horrific about the monstrous, but often ignores the fact that these same figures can make us laugh, but these ideas are not so easily separated. This is because humor and horror are both "deeply involved with category violation" (Carroll, "Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity," 41). As demonstrated here, examining the humorous aspects of monstrosity alongside the horrific can often lead to a change in narrative reading. The loathly lady portrays her message on femininity not just through screaming but through laughing. To read one without the other would be to only look at half of how she interacts with gender politics and the grotesque.

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## Vita

Jessica Montine White was born in Logan, Utah and graduated from Watauga High School in June 2008. Upon graduation, she studied English with a concentration in Professional Writing at Western Carolina University, where she graduated in May 2012. She completed her Master of Arts in English at Appalachian State University in December 2015. She currently resides in Asheville where she works at Haywood Community College and continues to seek employment opportunities in education.