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Analysis of The Wife of Bath's Tale from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" through the Lense of Propp's Narrative Function

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Abstract

This study examines Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale through Vladimir Propp's narrative functions as a means of understanding how Chaucer follows and subverts traditional structures of folktales. The Canterbury Tales is one of the most important works in medieval literature, while The Wife of Bath's Tale is especially famous for its complex depiction of gender relations, power, and moral teaching. The purpose of the investigation is to explain the structural elements of the tale using Propp's 31 narrative functions applied to folk stories. In mapping these functions onto the tale, the research underlines how Chaucer follows conventional patterns of storytelling but innovates in crucial areas, mainly when it comes to gender roles and moral redemption. This study used a structuralist approach which examines exactly how this knightly quest of redemption was non-traditional in that his intellectual and moral growth was pitted against the more physical challenges of traditional narratives. The results of the analysis are that 18 of Propp's functions are represented, whereas several of the most important functions—struggle and victory among them—are negated. Through this, Chaucer attacks the gendered prescription of medieval society and, through the figures of the queen and the old woman, develops firm arguments for female self-determination. The study concluded that Chaucer draws upon Propp's narrative structure in his resistance to and rearticulation of socially held attitudes regarding gender, power, and heroism—to develop the tale into a progressivist critique against traditional medieval values.

Keywords: *Propp's narrative functions; Chaucer; The Wife of Bath's Tale; The Canterbury Tales*

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Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is one of the most renowned works of Middle English literature, providing readers with a vivid portrayal of medieval society through a variety of narratives. Among these, The Wife of

Bath's Tale stands out as a complex narrative that intertwines themes of gender, power, and morality. Chaucer's character, the Wife of Bath, offers a subversive view of traditional gender roles, creating a narrative that reflects both her experience and desires. In The Wife of Bath's Tale, the central question revolves around what women truly desire, leading to a moral tale of empowerment, equality, and justice. Analyzing this tale through the lens of Vladimir Propp's narrative functions can provide a structural understanding of how the plot unfolds, how characters fulfill specific roles, and how thematic elements are developed through these functions.

Propp's theory of narrative functions, primarily derived from Russian folktales, outlines 31 narrative steps that occur in a sequential structure within traditional storytelling. These functions serve to categorize actions that move the plot forward and define specific character roles, such as the hero, villain, donor, and princess (Propp, 1928). While originally developed for folktales, Propp's functions can also be applied to literary works like Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale to identify structural patterns within the narrative and explore how Chaucer adheres to or subverts traditional storytelling conventions. In The Wife of Bath's Tale, the protagonist, a knight, embarks on a quest to discover what women most desire, which ultimately brings him to an encounter with an elderly woman who helps him resolve his quest (Chaucer, 2003). Propp's functions can be observed in various stages of the tale: from the initial misdeed (the knight's crime of rape) to the punishment and his task to find an answer to the queen's question, and finally to the resolution where the knight gains not only forgiveness but also a new understanding of women's autonomy (Jordan, 2006). The old woman fulfills the role of the donor figure, offering aid in exchange for the knight's promise to marry her, while the queen represents the authority figure who sets the knight's quest in motion.

Previous research has thoroughly examined The Wife of Bath's Tale from a variety of critical perspectives. Feminist scholars have highlighted its progressive critique of medieval gender norms (Dinshaw, 1989; Rigby, 2000), while others have looked into its moral and social implications (Cooper, 2004; Grudin, 2021). Structural analyses have frequently focused on Chaucer's narrative innovations, which demonstrate his ability to follow and deviate from traditional storytelling conventions (Brooks, 2019; Hansen, 2019). Mann (2002) contends that the traditionally 'female' virtues of patience and pity are central to Chaucer's moral ethos, necessitating a new definition of ideal masculinity. However, these studies typically focus on thematic interpretations or socio-cultural critiques, leaving a gap in understanding the story's structural coherence within established narrative frameworks.

This study attempts to bridge this gap by examining The Wife of Bath's Tale through the lens of Vladimir Propp's narrative functions. Propp's theory, originally developed to explore the structural elements of Russian folktales, offers a systematic framework for identifying and categorizing the essential building blocks of a narrative. By applying Propp's 31 narrative functions to The Wife of Bath's Tale, this study not only identifies Chaucer's use of traditional narrative structures but also highlights his deliberate subversions, particularly in terms of gender and moral growth.

The novelty of this research lies in its structuralist approach, which offers a dual perspective: examining how The Wife of Bath's Tale conforms to folktale archetypes while simultaneously challenging these conventions to advance its thematic concerns. Specifically, the study illustrates how Chaucer reimagines the hero's journey, replacing physical trials with moral and intellectual challenges. Furthermore, the analysis underscores Chaucer's feminist undertones, as the tale positions female figures as agents of wisdom and authority, ultimately reshaping the structure of medieval storytelling.

By mapping the narrative of The Wife of Bath's Tale onto Propp's functions, this analysis will reveal how Chaucer plays with both medieval narrative conventions and audience expectations. This approach sheds light on the tale's underlying themes, such as

the structure of power between genders, moral redemption, and the fluidity of social roles (Laskaya, 1995). Moreover, the application of Propp's structuralist theory allows for an exploration of how Chaucer's tale fits into broader patterns of medieval storytelling, while also challenging these patterns to convey a more progressive view of women's autonomy and authority (Wood, 1999). This structuralist analysis, grounded in Propp's functions, offers new insights into the intersections of gender, power, and narrative form in Chaucer's work.

By bridging the structural analysis of Propp's functions with Chaucer's thematic innovations, this study makes a distinct contribution to Chaucerian scholarship. It not only advances our understanding of the narrative architecture of The Wife of Bath's Tale but also provides fresh insights into its socio-cultural critique of gender, power, and morality. This investigation invites further interdisciplinary explorations of Chaucer's work, positioning it within the broader context of narrative theory and medieval literature.

This research aims to investigate the narrative structure of The Wife of Bath's Tale using Propp's functions to illustrate how Chaucer both adheres to and diverges from traditional narrative archetypes. Furthermore, this study will explore how the manipulation of these functions serves to enhance the thematic concerns of the tale, particularly in terms of female agency and moral justice.

Vladimir Propp's theory of narrative structure, articulated in Morphology of the Folktale (1928), provides a systematic method for analyzing the structure of folktales (Propp et al., 2013). Propp identified 31 narrative functions that typically appear in a linear sequence. These functions serve as building blocks for the narrative, and each represents an action that drives the plot forward. Characters in these stories fulfill specific roles (spheres of action), such as the hero, villain, donor, and princess, who contribute to the development of the narrative through these actions.

The main premise of Propp's theory is that despite the diversity in folktales, their underlying structure follows a consistent pattern. This theoretical framework emphasizes the formalist approach, focusing on the structure and form of the narrative rather than its content. While originally applied to Russian folktales, Propp's theory has been widely used in analyzing literature, including medieval narratives such as Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales.

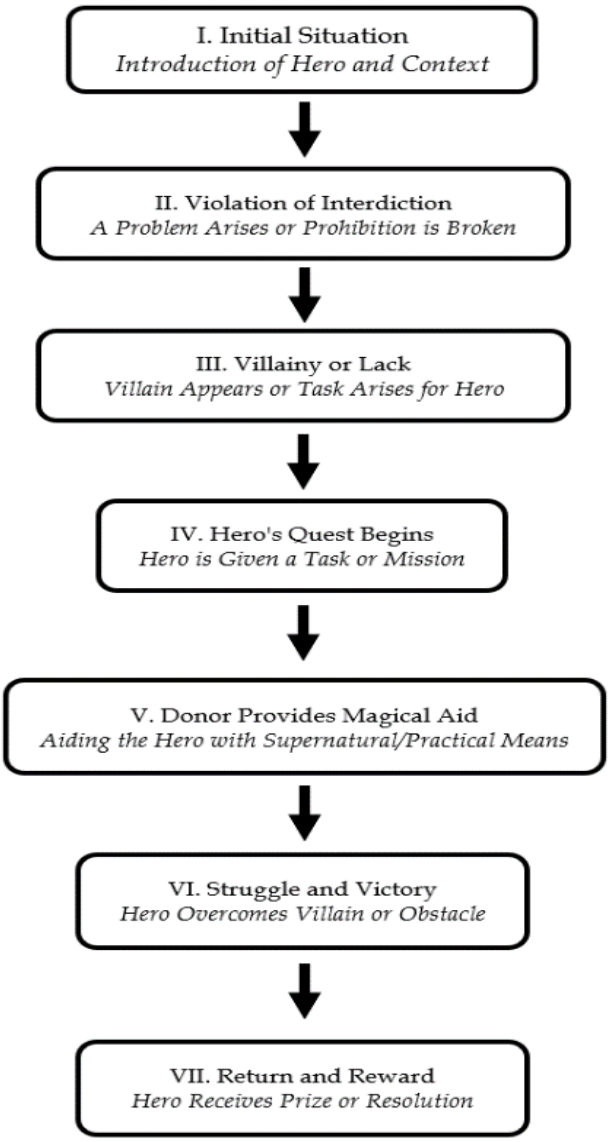
In this framework, each of the 31 functions appears as a key narrative step, beginning with the initial situation and progressing through stages of conflict, struggle, assistance, and resolution. Propp grouped these 31 functions into four spheres of action: the Introduction, which sets the stage and introduces key characters; the Body of the Story, where the main quest unfolds, marked by trials and challenges; the Donor Sequence, wherein the hero receives aid or knowledge essential to resolving the conflict; and the Hero's Return, which concludes the narrative, often with resolution and reward (Propp, 1928; Brooks, 2019). These spheres provide a structural lens through which one can analyze the interplay of actions and roles within a narrative. The following provides a brief overview of some of the core functions in Propp's schema:

1. Absentation - A member of the community leaves, creating a void.
2. Interdiction - A warning or prohibition is given.
3. Violation - The interdiction is violated, initiating conflict.
4. Reconnaissance - The villain seeks information or conducts surveillance.
5. Delivery - The villain receives information.
6. Struggle - Direct confrontation between hero and villain.
7. Victory - The hero triumphs over the villain.
8. Return - The hero returns to the community, often with a reward.

In The Wife of Bath's Tale, the narrative can be analyzed using Propp's functions to understand the sequence of events that shape the plot. The knight's quest to discover what women most desire and his eventual moral redemption follows a recognizable structural pattern, despite Chaucer's deviations from traditional folklore elements.

The figure below illustrates the flow of Propp's narrative functions as applied to the typical structure of folktales and how it could map onto a text like The Wife of Bath's Tale

Figure 1. Propp's Narrative Function Model



Methodology

This study adopted a structuralist approach to analyze Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale using Vladimir Propp's theory of narrative functions. The structuralist approach is a literary theory that emphasizes the underlying structures that govern human cultures and the systems of meaning within literature. According to structuralist theory, all narratives share common structures, and the focus of analysis is on the universal patterns that underlie texts, rather than the individual content or variations (Barry, 2018; Eagleton, 2011). This approach seeks to uncover the deep structures of stories, focusing on how language, actions, and characters fit into predefined roles that construct meaning in literature.

The methodology will be divided into several phases, each designed to systematically apply Propp's narrative functions to the text and explore how these functions reveal deeper insights into the tale's structure, themes, and characters. This study will not involve any respondents, as it will use descriptive research to interpret and analyze

the literary piece. Descriptive research, according to Nassaji (2015), involves the systematic description of a phenomenon, focusing on providing an accurate depiction and interpretation without manipulating variables. It aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the subject being studied, making it ideal for analyzing texts and their structures.

Propp's Narrative Function, on the other hand, is described as a set of 31 possible actions or events that typically occur in folktales, forming the structural foundation of the narrative. These functions are universal across many stories and involve predictable character roles such as the hero, the villain, the donor, and the princess (Brooks, 2019). Each function serves as a building block for the story, moving the plot forward through a recognizable sequence of actions, which can be applied to different literary works, including The Wife of Bath's Tale.

These 31 functions are further grouped into four spheres of action that outline the flow of the narrative: the Introduction, where the situation and main characters are established; the Body of the Story, which includes the hero's trials and the main quest; the Donor Sequence, in which the hero receives critical aid or knowledge; and the Hero's Return, where the resolution occurs and the narrative concludes, often with a reward or transformation (Propp, 1928; Brooks, 2019). These spheres not only provide a framework for understanding the story's structure but also highlight Chaucer's innovative adaptations of traditional folktale elements.

Results and Discussion

The table below maps Vladimir Propp's 31 narrative functions onto Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale, with an indication of whether each function is present, absent, or subverted, along with an explanation for its presence or absence in the tale.

Table 1. Mapping of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale using Propp's Narrative Functions

Propp's Function	Presence	Explanation
1. Absentation	Present	The knight departs on a quest to discover what women most desire, starting his journey of redemption.
2. Interdiction	Present	The queen imposes a condition on the knight: to answer the question of what women most desire in one year.
3. Violation of Interdiction	Absent	The knight does not violate the queen's condition; instead, he faithfully undertakes the quest.
4. Reconnaissance	Present	The knight seeks information from various women about their desires, fulfilling the reconnaissance function.
5. Delivery	Absent	No direct delivery of information to a villain occurs; this function is not applicable in the narrative.
6. Trickery	Absent	There is no trickery involved by the antagonist or other characters, deviating from the typical folktale formula.
7. Complicity	Absent	The knight does not fall into any trick or deception, which is common in traditional folktales.
8. Villainy or Lack	Present	The knight's crime of rape represents the initial act of villainy, motivating the rest of the plot.
9. Mediation	Present	The queen sends the knight on a quest, acting as an intermediary who gives him a chance at redemption.
10. Counteraction	Present	The knight accepts the queen's condition and departs on his journey, attempting to correct his crime.
11. Departure	Present	The knight physically departs from the court on his quest to find the answer, marking the departure function.
12. First Function of Donor	Present	The knight meets the old woman, who tests him by demanding his promise to marry her in exchange for the answer.
13. Hero's Reaction	Subverted	The knight reluctantly agrees to marry the old woman, showcasing a mix of agency and submission to circumstance.

Propp's Function	Presence	Explanation
14. Receipt of Magical Agent	Present	The old woman provides the "magical" solution (the answer to the queen's question) in exchange for the knight's promise.
15. Guidance	Absent	There is no traditional guiding character or force, as the knight must rely on his own initiative to find the answer.
16. Struggle	Subverted	The knight's struggle is internal and moral rather than a physical battle, contrasting with typical Proppian struggles.
17. Branding	Absent	The knight is not physically marked or branded; rather, his character is morally marked by his actions.
18. Victory	Subverted	The knight's victory comes through submission to the old woman's wisdom, subverting the heroic conquest trope.
19. Liquidation	Present	The knight's problem is resolved when he provides the correct answer and marries the old woman.
20. Return	Present	The knight returns to court after completing his quest, returning victorious but morally changed.
21. Pursuit	Absent	There is no pursuit in the traditional sense; no antagonist chases the knight.
22. Rescue	Absent	No rescue occurs, as the knight's success is based on wisdom rather than being saved by external forces.
23. Unrecognized Arrival	Absent	The knight's return is recognized by the queen and court; there is no hidden or disguised return.
24. Unfounded Claims	Absent	No false claims to the knight's victory or honor are made; the focus remains on his personal redemption.
25. Difficult Task	Present	The knight is tasked with finding the answer to what women most desire, which proves to be a difficult and complex challenge.
26. Solution	Present	The knight provides the correct answer and thus satisfies the queen's condition, marking the solution of the quest.
27. Recognition	Present	The old woman reveals her true identity after the knight accepts her; this moment of recognition is key to the resolution.
28. Exposure	Absent	No exposure of villainy occurs since the narrative focuses on redemption rather than uncovering treachery.
29. Transfiguration	Present	The old woman transforms into a young and beautiful woman, representing the narrative's moment of reward.
30. Punishment	Subverted	Instead of punishment for the knight, the tale offers redemption through moral growth and understanding of women's autonomy.
31. Wedding	Present	The knight and the transformed woman are wed, bringing the story to a close with a typical Proppian wedding scene.

The application of Propp's 31 narrative functions to The Wife of Bath's Tale aligns with and builds upon the findings of previous research, revealing Chaucer's intricate interplay with traditional storytelling structures. As Table 1 illustrates, 18 of Propp's functions are present in the narrative, while significant deviations occur in areas such as the struggle and the hero's reaction. This balance of adherence and innovation supports earlier analyses that have emphasized Chaucer's dual approach: respecting conventional narrative forms while reconfiguring them to convey progressive moral and societal critiques.

Feminist scholars, such as Dinshaw (1989) and Rigby (2000), have identified The Wife of Bath's Tale as a critique of medieval gender norms, highlighting its advocacy for female agency through the central roles of the queen and the old woman. These findings align with the subverted narrative functions identified in Table 1, such as the knight's struggle, which is transformed from a physical confrontation to an intellectual and moral challenge. Similarly, scholars like Mann (2002) have explored Chaucer's redefinition of ideal masculinity, which is evident in the tale's deviation from traditional heroism, as the knight's growth is marked by humility and respect for women's autonomy rather than acts of physical valor.

Additionally, structural analyses by Brooks (2019) and Hansen (2019) have underscored Chaucer's narrative flexibility, demonstrating his capacity to follow established storytelling conventions while making deliberate changes to emphasize moral and thematic concerns. The results in Table 1 reinforce this perspective, showing how Chaucer's selective adherence to Proppian functions creates a structurally coherent narrative that critiques societal norms. However, unlike prior studies that often focus on thematic or socio-cultural interpretations, this analysis directly addresses the structural underpinnings of Chaucer's tale, filling a gap in the literature by contextualizing his narrative strategies within Propp's framework. This approach not only validates earlier thematic conclusions but also deepens our understanding of the structural integrity and innovation in The Wife of Bath's Tale.

A simple frequency distribution highlights the presence or absence of these functions:

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of the Present, Absent, and Subverted Narrative Functions in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale

Function	Present	Absent	Subverted
Functions (Total)	**18**	**8**	**5**

Table 2 highlights the alignment of The Wife of Bath's Tale with Propp's schema, while also drawing attention to key subversions in functions like "Struggle" and "Hero's Reaction." These subversions underscore Chaucer's narrative ingenuity and thematic focus, reinforcing insights from prior research. Feminist analyses, such as those by Dinshaw (1989) and Rigby (2000), have explored Chaucer's progressive critique of medieval gender norms, which is reflected in these deviations from Propp's framework. For instance, the knight's internal moral struggle replaces a traditional physical confrontation, aligning with Chaucer's focus on intellectual and moral growth rather than outward heroism.

Moreover, Mann's (2002) argument that Chaucer redefines ideal masculinity through virtues such as humility and respect for women finds support in these subversions. The hero's reaction, typically characterized by decisive and valorous action in folktales, is here transformed into a submission to the wisdom of female authority figures, further challenging traditional power structures and societal expectations.

Structural analyses by Brooks (2019) and Hansen (2019) have emphasized Chaucer's ability to adapt and innovate within conventional narrative forms. Table 2 corroborates these findings by demonstrating how Chaucer uses Propp's schema as a foundation while deliberately altering critical functions to amplify the tale's moral and thematic concerns. While prior studies have focused on thematic and socio-cultural critiques, the emphasis on structural deviations in this analysis provides a deeper understanding of Chaucer's narrative strategy, highlighting his skillful blend of tradition and innovation to address complex issues of morality and gender.

Table 3. Mapping of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale using the 4 Spheres in Propp's Narrative Functions

1st Sphere: Introduction Introduces the situation and most of the main characters, setting the	The characters were introduced in lines 1 to 6 which are the narrator and the pardoner. In lines 7 to 21, the narrator introduces the subject of her tale which is marriage and its difficulties, wherein she holds authority as she already experienced a lot of married life. In these lines, the narrator sets the subsequent story which is the tale.

scene for subsequent adventure.	
2nd Sphere: The Body of the story The main story starts here and extends to the departure of the hero on the main quest.	The main story starts in lines 22 to 30 as the narrator begins to start her tale. On the other hand, starting from line 31 up to line 94 is the main story itself which tells the story of a knight who is accused of rape and punished by the queen, whereas his life will be spared if in one year he will be able to discover the women's most desire. It is also indicated in the lines about his departure to a land that he is going to travel to for his punishment or quest.
3rd Sphere: The Donor Sequence The hero goes in search of a method by which the solution may be reached, gaining the magical agent from the Donor.	This 3rd sphere starts in line 95 up to line 164, wherein the knight asks every woman in the land for what they mostly desire, however, every woman there has different answers so he failed as he gave up and accepted his fate after almost year of searching for an answer. In line 165 to 254, show the story as he then meets an old lady who promises to tell him the answer if he is willing to do the favor that she asks for which is to marry her. He accepted it as he was left with no choice, then he returned later on to the Queen and gave his answer which is surprisingly correct, however, the old lady requests to the queen that the knight needs to fulfill his promise to marry her.
4th Sphere: The Hero's return In the final (and often optional) phase of the storyline, the hero returns home, hopefully uneventfully and to a hero's welcome, although this may not always be the case.	Line 255 up to line 440 marks the 4th sphere, wherein the knight returns to the old lady and fulfills her wish which is to marry her. At their wedding, the old lady asks the knight to choose whether he wants her to be beautiful and young but there is no guarantee that she will have good qualities or ugly and old but good and faithful wife, but the knight leaves the decision to his wife as the old lady choose on her own. At last, the old lady turns into a lovely, young, and rich in charms woman, after they kissed.

Table 3 demonstrates how The Wife of Bath's Tale can be structurally classified into Propp's four spheres of narrative action, providing a clear delineation of its progression while reinforcing previous analyses of its thematic and structural intricacies. The first sphere, lines 1 to 21, serves as the introduction, aligning with Propp's concept of the Initial Situation. Here, the tale sets the stage by introducing the knight and the moral and societal stakes, encapsulating the narrative's broader critique of justice and power structure.

The second sphere, covering lines 22 to 94, contains the body of the story, where the knight begins his quest to answer the queen's pivotal question. This phase corresponds to Proppian functions like Departure and the initial stages of Struggle, emphasizing the intellectual and moral challenges faced by the protagonist. This part reflects Chaucer's departure from traditional hero-driven action, a point emphasized by feminist scholars like Dinshaw (1989), who highlight the tale's focus on female authority and the subversion of male-dominated narrative roles.

In the third sphere, spanning lines 95 to 254, the old woman assumes the role of the donor, providing the knight with the answer to his quest. Her dual role as a helper and a moral agent reflects the complexity of Chaucer's characterization, aligning with Brooks's (2019) observations about his innovative manipulation of Propp's structures. This sequence underscores themes of humility and wisdom, central to Chaucer's redefinition of heroism, as discussed by Mann (2002).

Finally, lines 255 to 440 align with the fourth sphere, which encapsulates the knight's return and resolution. This phase fulfills Propp's Return and Wedding functions, as the knight keeps his promise to the old woman, resulting in her transformation and the culmination of his moral growth. The resolution, however, diverges from typical folktale conventions by prioritizing mutual respect and autonomy, a thematic departure highlighted in feminist critiques and supported by the tale's structural coherence.

By mapping the narrative onto Propp's four spheres, Table 3 not only highlights

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Chaucer's adherence to folktale structures but also underscores his intentional deviations in addressing complex issues of morality, gender, and power. This structural analysis complements and expands upon earlier thematic interpretations, offering a comprehensive understanding of Chaucer's narrative craft.

The application of Propp's 31 narrative functions to The Wife of Bath's Tale reveals both adherence to and deviation from traditional folktale structures. This discussion analyzes the significance of the present, absent, and subverted functions in the context of the tale and Chaucer's thematic concerns.

1. Adherence to Propp's Functions

A frequency analysis of Propp's functions in The Wife of Bath's Tale shows that out of the 31 possible functions, 18 are clearly present, while 8 are either absent or modified. The remaining 5 functions are subverted, particularly in the areas of Struggle and Return, which focus on moral and intellectual challenges rather than physical confrontations (Wood, 2021). Several of Propp's functions are clearly present in the tale, including the Absentation, Interdiction, Departure, and Wedding functions. The knight's quest begins with the traditional structure of a hero being tasked with solving a problem, departing on a journey, and ultimately being rewarded with a marriage. These functions are typical of folktales and align with Propp's framework, which emphasizes a linear progression of actions leading to the hero's success (Cooper, 2021).

The Receipt of Magical Agent function is another key element in the tale, as the old woman provides the knight with the answer he needs to save his life. However, this function is not purely physical or supernatural but intellectual, highlighting Chaucer's emphasis on wisdom over brute strength or magical intervention (Grudin, 2021). This transformation of Propp's "magical agent" into knowledge reflects the tale's thematic focus on the power of understanding and moral growth.

2. Deviations and Subversions

While many of Propp's functions are present, the narrative also includes notable deviations that reflect Chaucer's complex thematic concerns. For instance, Propp's traditional "Struggle" function, which typically involves a physical confrontation between the hero and the villain, is replaced by a psychological and moral struggle in The Wife of Bath's Tale. The knight's internal conflict—his reluctance to marry the old woman—serves as a form of "struggle," but it subverts the conventional hero-villain dichotomy, highlighting Chaucer's focus on moral redemption rather than physical confrontation (Saler & Tapper, 2020). Chaucer's presentation of the knight's internal conflict—his reluctance to marry the old woman—is a pivotal deviation from the traditional narrative struggle seen in folktales. Typically, the "struggle" in Vladimir Propp's framework involves a direct confrontation between the hero and a villain, a moment of physical or strategic combat that defines the hero's courage and prowess. However, in The Wife of Bath's Tale, the nature of this struggle is redefined. Instead of an external opponent, the knight faces an internal battle with his own prejudices, societal expectations, and personal desires.

This internal struggle begins when the knight, having committed a grave misdeed, is sentenced to a quest for redemption by the queen. After receiving the answer to his quest from the old woman—who demands marriage as compensation—the knight grapples with the idea of fulfilling his promise. His hesitation stems from deep-seated biases: the old woman is unattractive, poor, and socially inferior, qualities that conflict with the knight's expectations of a wife and his own sense of nobility and status. This reluctance exposes the knight's internalized values that prioritize superficial appearances and social norms over moral character and wisdom.

Chaucer uses this conflict to dismantle the conventional hero-villain dichotomy. In traditional narratives, the hero's opponent often embodies an external evil that must be overcome to restore order. In contrast, the knight's "villain" is not the old woman, but his

own flawed worldview. The old woman serves as a mirror, reflecting the knight's internal failings and challenging him to reconsider his values. This inversion transforms the narrative struggle into a moral and psychological journey, emphasizing growth and redemption rather than triumph over an adversary.

Furthermore, the tale underscores the knight's development by presenting his eventual capitulation not as defeat, but as a necessary step toward enlightenment. When he ultimately allows the old woman to choose her own form—trusting her wisdom and agency over his shallow desires—he achieves a moral victory that redefines his character. The resolution of this internal struggle aligns with the tale's broader themes of respect, equality, and the reconfiguration of power, particularly in relation to gender.

By framing the knight's struggle as an internal battle, Chaucer shifts the focus from action-oriented heroism to introspection and moral reckoning. This subversion highlights the tale's critique of medieval notions of chivalry and masculinity, replacing physical confrontation with a transformative realization that true honor lies in humility and respect for others, particularly women. In doing so, Chaucer not only adheres to Propp's structural framework but also enriches it, illustrating the versatility of narrative functions in addressing complex societal and moral issues (Saler & Tapper, 2020).

A notable deviation from Propp's framework occurs in the Struggle function. Traditional folktales often feature a physical confrontation between the hero and the villain. In The Wife of Bath's Tale, however, the struggle is internal and moral. The knight's primary battle is with his own prejudices and understanding of women's desires, subverting the usual narrative of a hero defeating a villain. This subversion reflects Chaucer's broader critique of medieval gender norms, as the tale emphasizes intellectual and moral challenges rather than physical ones (Burke, 2018).

The Victory function is similarly subverted. Rather than achieving victory through strength or cunning, the knight's success comes from his submission to the wisdom of the old woman. This subversion of traditional gender roles, where the woman holds the power of knowledge and choice, is a central theme of the tale. The knight's ultimate victory lies in his recognition of women's autonomy, rather than in the defeat of a villain or rival (Fein, 2022).

The Punishment function is another area of deviation. Rather than being punished for his crime of rape, the knight is given a chance at redemption. His journey is framed as a moral education, where he learns the importance of respecting women's desires. This emphasis on redemption over punishment aligns with medieval Christian values of repentance and forgiveness but also subverts Propp's typical folktale structure, where villains are often punished for their misdeeds (Brooks, 2019).

The resolution of The Wife of Bath's Tale, where the old woman transforms into a beautiful young woman after the knight submits to her will, exemplifies Chaucer's deliberate subversion of traditional narrative roles, specifically those outlined in Propp's framework. In folktales, the hero's reward often involves the acquisition of wealth, power, or a beautiful bride, with the narrative centering on the hero's dominance and achievements. However, Chaucer reimagines this convention to shift agency from the knight to the old woman, emphasizing themes of female autonomy and decision-making.

The pivotal moment in the tale occurs when the old woman offers the knight a choice: she can either remain old and faithful or become young and potentially unfaithful. By relinquishing control and allowing her to choose, the knight undergoes a critical transformation. His act of submission signifies not only personal growth but also a recognition of the woman's right to autonomy—a stark contrast to the patriarchal norms of medieval society, where women were often treated as objects or passive participants in narratives. This decision reshapes the dynamics of authority or power between the knight and the old woman, placing her in a position of authority and wisdom.

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Chaucer deepens this subversion through the old woman's transformation. Her change from an old, unattractive figure to a beautiful, young woman traditionally aligns with the folktale archetype of the "magical reward" given to the hero for their deeds. However, Chaucer disrupts this trope by making the transformation conditional upon the knight's willingness to cede control. The resolution becomes less about the knight's gain and more about the validation of the old woman's agency. Her decision to transform only after his consent underscores her power and autonomy, illustrating that her beauty and loyalty are not commodities to be demanded but gifts she chooses to offer.

This deviation from Propp's expected roles allows Chaucer to critique medieval gender norms in multiple ways. First, it challenges the idea that a woman's value is tied solely to her appearance or her submission to male authority. Instead, the tale elevates the old woman as a figure of wisdom and moral authority. Second, it reframes the hero's journey not as a quest for conquest or dominance but as a path toward understanding, humility, and respect for others. Finally, the old woman's dual transformation—physical and symbolic—reinforces the theme that true harmony in relationships arises from mutual respect and equality, rather than hierarchical power structures.

By using the old woman's transformation as a narrative turning point, Chaucer critiques the rigid gender roles of his time and redefines the expectations of both heroes and heroines in storytelling. This resolution not only subverts Propp's conventional hero-reward framework but also positions The Wife of Bath's Tale as a progressive and feminist critique of medieval social norms (Hansen, 2019).

3. Thematic Implications of Subversions

The subversions of Propp's functions in The Wife of Bath's Tale highlight Chaucer's engagement with the dynamics when it comes to gender and power. The tale shifts the focus from traditional heroism to moral growth, emphasizing the knight's need to understand and respect women. This thematic shift is reinforced by the roles of the queen and the old woman, who wield significant authority over the knight, in contrast to the typical male-dominated narratives of folktales (Dinshaw, 2021).

By transforming the narrative's central struggle into a moral and intellectual challenge, Chaucer critiques medieval societal expectations of gender and power. The knight's eventual success is contingent not on his actions but on his ability to relinquish control and allow women to make decisions for themselves. This inversion of power role is central to the tale's feminist undertones, reflecting Chaucer's progressive approach to gender politics in The Canterbury Tales (Cooper, 2021).

4. Alignment of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale in Propp's Narrative Functions' Four Spheres

a. Sphere 1: Introduction

Propp's first sphere introduces the situation and characters, setting the stage for the main action. In The Wife of Bath's Tale, this is done between lines 1 and 6, where the narrator introduces herself and begins to discuss the theme of marriage. The narrator holds authority in this realm, having been married multiple times, thus positioning herself as an expert. The story transitions into the knight's tale around lines 7 to 21, where marriage and its difficulties are introduced as central concerns.

This phase aligns closely with Propp's Initial Situation function, where the reader is introduced to the protagonist (the knight) and the overarching conflict—his crime and impending punishment. Propp's theory emphasizes the importance of establishing a clear conflict in this initial sphere, and The Wife of Bath's Tale follows this structure by framing the knight's punishment as the central problem that will drive the narrative forward.

The introductory sphere successfully follows Propp's framework by establishing the moral and societal expectations of the

narrative. Chaucer's deviation from typical folktale structures lies in the Wife of Bath's direct engagement with the audience, which is a meta-narrative approach not addressed in Propp's original schema (Brooks, 2019). The moral and societal expectations of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale intertwine closely with the application of Vladimir Propp's narrative functions, as outlined in Table 1 of the study. Chaucer's tale critiques medieval notions of gender and power while adhering to, subverting, or omitting specific Proppian functions to reinforce these themes. The knight's quest, imposed as a punishment for his crime of rape, mirrors societal expectations of redemption and moral growth. His journey is shaped by a moral imperative to respect women's autonomy—a progressive theme embedded in the narrative.

For example, the societal expectation of justice is reflected in the knight's punishment (Mediation and Counteraction), while his ultimate redemption aligns with Christian values of repentance rather than retributive justice, diverging from Propp's traditional "Punishment" function. The old woman's dual role as a donor and moral agent highlights the inversion of power, emphasizing female authority and wisdom over the knight's actions. Her transformation at the conclusion symbolizes the moral and social rewards of embracing mutual respect and choice, fulfilling Propp's "Wedding" function while also advancing the tale's critique of gender norms.

Chaucer's strategic manipulation of Propp's narrative functions—subverting the traditional hero-villain confrontation with a focus on intellectual struggle and moral growth—demonstrates his nuanced approach to storytelling. The societal expectation for redemption through understanding and respect, rather than brute heroism, is reflected in the knight's journey and ultimate success, reinforcing the tale's progressive moral ethos within a medieval framework.

b. Sphere 2: The Body of the Story

In Propp's second sphere, the hero embarks on his quest. For The Wife of Bath's Tale, this spans lines 22 to 94. The knight's quest to discover what women desire most is outlined as a form of punishment, and it involves traveling across lands to ask women their opinions. This part of the narrative encompasses Propp's Violation of Interdiction (the knight's crime), Departure (the knight's journey to find the answer), and the initial Struggle (the difficulty of finding a consistent answer from women).

The knight's quest to answer the queen's question also exemplifies Propp's Testing function, as the knight encounters numerous challenges in his quest. Each woman offers a different answer, reflecting the complexity of the task and the challenge to traditional heroic quests, which often have straightforward solutions.

The knight's journey and the women he encounters highlight the subversion of traditional gender roles, as women now control the knight's fate, contrary to the usual male-dominated power structures in folktales (Cooper, 2021). The lack of physical combat in this sphere, replaced by a moral and intellectual quest, reflects Chaucer's focus on societal critique rather than action-driven heroism (Saler & Tapper, 2020).

c. Sphere 3: The Donor Sequence

This phase, spanning lines 95 to 254, represents the Donor Sequence in Propp's schema. Here, the knight meets the old woman who serves as the Donor by offering him the correct answer to the queen's question in exchange for his promise to marry her. The old woman represents both the Donor and Magical Agent, in line with Propp's structure, as she provides the key to solving the knight's dilemma.

In Propp's functions, the Donor Sequence is often a pivotal moment where the hero receives a tool or piece of knowledge to help resolve the conflict. In this case, the knowledge comes at a cost, as the knight must sacrifice his autonomy by agreeing to marry the old woman. This bargain exemplifies the Hero's Reaction function, where the hero must make a decision under pressure, furthering the moral complexity of the narrative.

The old woman's role as both helper and obstacle presents a duality not always seen in traditional folktales, where helpers are

typically benevolent. The knight's reluctance to marry her speaks to his internal struggle with societal expectations of beauty and virtue, a theme that reflects Chaucer's critique of superficial judgment (Burke, 2018). The Donor Sequence emphasizes that true wisdom comes with humility and submission, a moral lesson aligned with medieval Christian values (Hansen, 2019).

d. Sphere 4: The Hero's Return

The final sphere, between lines 255 and 440, represents Propp's Return and Resolution functions. After delivering the correct answer to the queen and fulfilling his promise to marry the old woman, the knight is presented with a choice by his new wife: he can have her young and beautiful but unfaithful, or old and ugly but loyal. The knight's decision to let her choose completes his transformation and redemption, aligning with Propp's Victory function.

This marks a deviation from traditional folktales, as the old woman herself chooses to transform into a young, beautiful, and faithful wife—representing a symbolic reward not just for the knight's submission, but for the recognition of women's autonomy (Grudin, 2021). The Wedding function is fulfilled, as the tale ends with their marriage, but, significantly, the resolution is determined by the old woman's decision rather than the knight's.

The knight's ultimate victory lies not in his strength or cunning, but in his moral growth, reflecting a central theme of the tale—respect for women's agency and desires (Fein, 2022). This ending subverts Propp's traditional hero-villain roles by positioning the old woman as both the catalyst and resolver of the conflict. Chaucer's tale complicates the typical "happy ending" by embedding moral lessons about power, choice, and respect (Dinshaw, 2021).

Conclusion

The analysis confirms that Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Tale aligns with 18 of Vladimir Propp's 31 narrative functions and four spheres of action, demonstrating a clear adherence to traditional folktale structures. However, Chaucer also incorporates significant subversions that reflect his thematic concerns, particularly in the domains of gender roles and morality. Notably, Chaucer replaces typical physical confrontations associated with struggle and heroism with the knight's moral and intellectual growth, emphasizing internal transformation over external victories. The narrative foregrounds the inversion of traditional gender roles, highlighting female autonomy through the influential roles of the queen and the old woman, who direct the knight's journey and redemption. Additionally, Chaucer diverges from the conventional punishment-driven resolution, instead focusing on moral redemption. The knight's journey underscores the importance of wisdom and humility, particularly in acknowledging and respecting women's autonomy.

Building on these findings, the researcher proposes several recommendations for future studies. First, other tales from The Canterbury Tales could be examined using Propp's narrative functions to uncover patterns of adherence to or deviations from traditional folktale structures across Chaucer's oeuvre. Second, incorporating psychological theories related to moral development may provide deeper insights into the knight's transformation, emphasizing the narrative's focus on internal growth over physical action. Lastly, future research should explore the feminist undertones of The Wife of Bath's Tale more thoroughly, especially regarding Chaucer's portrayal of women in roles of authority and wisdom, which challenge and reconfigure medieval societal norms. These directions could enrich understanding of Chaucer's innovative narrative techniques and his engagement with complex social themes.

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