

## ABSTRACT

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Title: Gendered Sovereignty And Constructions Of Identity In Medieval Loathly Lady Tales  
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This thesis analyzes Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," John Gower's "Tale of Florent," and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. These three tales follow the motif of the "loathly lady." The loathly lady motif foregrounds the term "sovereignty" as answer to the riddle: What do women desire most? Each of the three tales centers sovereignty as a feminine desire; yet, when the women receive sovereignty from their partners, the women conform to fit the desires of their masculine partners. If the promise of sovereignty inhibits one's agency in a relationship, who is allowed to receive sovereignty, then?

This thesis examines how the three texts define, contextualize, and implement the term "sovereignty" to measure how masculine and feminine-coded characters develop their gender identities based on the degree of sovereignty that they exhibit. By using the lens of gender theory and its adoption of Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity," expected behavior of stock characters such as the masculine, chivalric knight, and the older, loathly lady become skewed when masculinity and femininity do not match accepted norms of gender binaries. As contemporary cultures shift to adopting a gender spectrum, this thesis highlights that the complication of gender identities has also been present in medieval identities. In comparing each tale, adaptation theory reveals that historical and cultural contexts shape the ways that both medieval and contemporary audiences receive the texts, as well as determine how one accesses sovereignty based on their own identities.