

## Chaucer on Wildness: The Host, the Monk, and the Tragedy of Cenobia

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When the Pilgrim Chaucer finishes his tale of Melibee (and of his tame wife), Harry Bailey the Host suggests that he would only confront his wife when she is in a rage if he were “lik a wilde leoun, fool-hardy” (1916); and, because Harry sees himself as neither fool nor beast, he chooses instead to leave his house on these occasions. The Monk then tells a series of short stories, all tragedies, a few of which echo the Host’s image of a wild animal. By assigning these images to both Harry and the Monk, Chaucer raises for us the question: to what extent are the Monk’s tragedies -- particularly that of Cenobia, a woman closely associated with the wilderness and the only woman who has her own story in the Monk’s collection -- a response to the Host’s account of his own personal tragedy which he calls marriage? to what extent does the Monk imply that wildness is synonymous with foolishness, pain, and exile -- or, conversely, with “full hardiness”, strength, and a peace beyond the false security of the civilized world?

I suggest that, as a whole, the episode with the Monk -- including the prologue with the Host and the epilogue in which the Knight interrupts and rebukes the Monk -- is a Chaucerian meditation on power and will, on loss of self-control and loss of self. In particular, I examine how Chaucer's images of the wild return us to his interest in the dichotomies of reason vs. emotion, control vs. helplessness, human will vs. divine order, self-determination vs. social inertia; and how the Chaucerian pilgrim must continually reflect on the extent to which he has overestimated the importance of his own power and control (and so finds himself in need of correction from the wild beyond his control), and the extent to which he has been too tame, allowing himself to be controlled in a negative way (and so in need of disrupting his world with a display of wildness). I argue that, for Chaucer, something wild, in the sense of being beyond one's control or expectation, can be both a danger and a necessity in the life of the individual who, through a rational application of power, must assert his will for the good at the same time remaining careful not to become lost in the pride of his own power.

## I. Chaucer's Wilderness

Nature (in the abstract), natural law, natural music and, of course, animals are familiar and important Chaucerian subjects, explored in the *Parliament of Fowls* and beyond. But while these themes have received considerable scholarly attention, neither images of the wilderness specifically nor the concept of the wild and wildness have been examined extensively in Chaucer studies.<sup>1</sup>

The wilderness is present but is not a common setting in Chaucer's

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<sup>1</sup> For studies on natural landscapes in Chaucer, see Sola; and also Haskell, on gardens and woods.

*Canterbury Tales*. The word “wildnesse” itself, though it appears a few times in Chaucer’s other works,<sup>2</sup> is not used by the pilgrims. In their tales, the adjective “wilde” / “wylde” appears less than fifty times. Most of those references are to wild (as opposed to tame) animals in general;<sup>3</sup> to particular beasts (boars, deer, lions);<sup>4</sup> or to natural phenomena, such as waves and storms.<sup>5</sup> Yet the few references within and without the *Tales* are often striking.

In one of the minor poems, for example, Chaucer invokes “the wildnesse” as an image of the entire world, of human existence in exile beyond the gates of Eden’s garden, distant from heaven and from truth:

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<sup>2</sup> Aeneas, landing in Libya, wanders in the forest “withouten any gyde” (LGW 3.969) until he encounters Venus disguised as a huntress: “So longe he walketh in this wilderness, / Til at the laste he mette an hunteresse” (3.970-71). Criseyde, in swearing her loyalty to Troilus, invokes the gods of the woods: “And this on every god celestial / I swere it yow, and ek on ech goddesse, / On every nymphe and deite infernal, / On satyry and fawny more and lesse, / That halve goddes ben of wildnesse . . .” (IV.1541-45). That Criseyde in this long speech also invokes virtually every other kind of god renders the gods of the wilderness no more or less significant. A more interesting use of “wildnesse” occurs in the short poem “Truth”, discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> St Jerome lives “in desert” where “he hadde no compaignye but of wilde beestes” (Parson’s Tale 345). Cenobia “with wilde beestes walked” (Monk’s Tale 2173). Sir Thopas enters a forest wherein “is many a wilde best” (755). By contrast, Emetreus, King of India, who rides with Arcite, bears on his hand “an egle tame”: “Aboute this kyng ther ran on every part / Ful many a tame leon and leopart” (Knight’s Tale 2178, 2185-86).

<sup>4</sup> In the Temple of Diana, a mural depicts “how Atthalante hunted the wilde boor” (Knight’s Tale 2070). As part of an illusion, the magician shows Aurelius “forestes, parkes ful of wilde deer” (Franklin’s Tale 1190). For an older, brief, paper specifically on beasts in Thopas, see Tucker; for a more recent book of essays on animals that takes a fresh look at Chaucer’s use of animals and beast imagery, see Van Dyke.

<sup>5</sup> In the Miller’s Tale, Nicholas warns John, there “shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood” (3517). Recounting Custance’s dangerous voyage, the Man of Law describes “wilde wawes” (468) and the “wilde see” (506). One of the Wife’s curses calls upon lightning and thunder: “With wilde thonder-dynt and firy leveve / Moote thy welked nekke be tobroke!” (276-77).

The wrastling for this world axeth a fal.  
 Her is non hoom, her nis but wildernesse:  
 Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!  
 Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;  
 Hold the heye wey and lat thy gost thee lede,  
 And trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede. ("Truth" 16-21)

On the whole, the Chaucerian wilderness is a negative space, a place of suffering (for St. Jerome, as the Parson notes [345]) and punishment (for Nabugodonosor in the Monk's Tale [2167-80; 2210-22]).

An individual who is "wylde" is usually someone dangerous and in need of restraint, either outside the natural order or part of the fallen natural world, over-powered by sensuality or emotion and unchecked by reason. Wildness of this sort, behavior and passion unbridled, is noted several times by the Knight. Palamon and Arcite, during their combat with each other, are described in less than flattering terms with animal metaphors: "In his fightyng [Palamon] were a wood leon, / And as a cruell tigre was Arcite; / As wilde bores gonne they to smyte" (1656-58).<sup>6</sup> In the Temple of Mars, on a mural of chaos and mischance, depicting a world gone mad, expected order is reversed and a hunter is slain by the bears he hunts: "The hunte strangled with the wilde beres" (2018).

In the Wife's prologue, she reproaches men for associating women and feminine desire with the wilderness and wildness. She objects to men accusing women of having a love reminiscent of hell, a wasteland for the

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<sup>6</sup> This is presumably the sense of wild as the Prioress employs it as well: "Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe" (633). The horses used by the magistrate to execute the Jews are not creatures living in the wilderness like bears and boars; they are domesticated, but are still full of energy and, in this case, allowed to be out of control. In that way, though the Prioress may be unaware of the parallel, the execution horses are not unlike the magistrate and the "Cristene folk" (614) who, outraged by the death of the Little Clergeon, punish the Jews in this extreme manner.

unwary male traveler; and of having hell's insatiable and uncontrolled desire, raging like Greek fire: "Thou liknest eek wommenes love to helle, / To bareyne lond, ther water may nat dwelle. / Thou liknest it also to wilde fyr; / The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir / To consume every thyng that brent wole be" (372-75). The ideal woman never acts "wildly", never moving toward any extreme or absolute (whether of passion or dullness):

. . . for were she never so glad,  
 Hyr lokyng was not foly sprad,  
 Ne wildely, thogh that she pleyde;  
 But ever, me thoght, hir eyen seyde,  
 "Be God, my wrathe ys al foryive!"  
 Therwith hir lyste so wel to lyve,  
 That dulnesse was of hir adrad.  
 She nas to sobre ne to glad;  
 In alle thynges more mesure . . . . (*Book of the Duchess* 873-81)

By contrast, youth requires a check on its impulses: "Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage, / For she was wyld and yong, and he was old" (Miller's Tale 3224-25).<sup>7</sup>

That sentiment is, however, like the comment the Wife attributes to her husband, from the perspective of an old man and a husband, reminding us that wildness, like so many other concepts in Chaucer, is often a matter of perspective, sometimes hard to define, and frequently ambiguous. Seen from the perspective of a corrupt, unjust, avaricious present, the wilderness of a nostalgia-tinted golden age, is alluring:

These tyraunts putte hem gladly nat in pres  
 No wildernesse ne no bussches for to winne,

<sup>7</sup> For a short study of Chaucer's use of the image of a bird in a cage, see Economu.

Ther poverte is, as seith Diogenes . . . .

. . . .

In caves and wodes softe and swete

Slepten this blissed folk withoute walles

On gras or leves in parfit quiete. ("The Former Age" 33-35, 42-44)

As a space without monetary or military value, the wilderness is ignored by tyrants of money and power; the urbanity and security of the court and the town are only a false contrast to the supposed danger of the wild, which in fact offers its own manner of rest and of peace.<sup>8</sup>

This desire for an alternative to the present -- whether that means to the court, the town, the authority of parents and of the Church, or the social etiquette of any given community -- is a theme developed by many Chaucerian pilgrims and characters in pilgrim stories. As we will see, in terms of ambiguous perspectives on the wild, the Host and the Monk's references to the wild and to wildness are some of the most interesting in Chaucer's tales.

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<sup>8</sup> Ambiguity often attaches to Chaucer's references to wildness and the wilderness. We noted above [note 2] that in the *LGW*, Aeneas wanders in the wilderness before meeting Dido. A few lines later, having arrived at Dido's court, "This Eneas is come to paradys" (3.1103). But it is not entirely clear whether the woods are part of the "swolow of hell" (3.1104) which Aeneas has recently experienced and which this paradise of Dido's stands against. The wild woods are both separate from and also an extension of Dido's court, materially quite different from the luxurious palace, but still an area under her control where she allows "maydens [to] walken in this contre here, / With arwes and with bowe, in this manere" (3.990-91) to hunt "wilde bor or other best" (3.980). Whether Aeneas and Dido would have been better off if he stayed in the woods is a matter both of debate and of perspective.

Another case in point is the Wife's objection, also noted above, to women's love being associated with the wilderness of hell and the destructiveness of "wild fire". The Wife is admittedly lying here; her husband, whom she accuses, never said this and she knows that. She is herself an example and proponent of desire unbound (or at least desire indulged). So the lesson here, whether wildness is to be avoided or pursued, celebrated or condemned, is ambiguous and, again, a matter of perspective.

## II. The Monk among the Critics

Possibly because the Monk's Tale is less of a tale than an uneven collection of longer and shorter character bios, it makes for an unwieldy subject of study and has never been as popular or received the same degree of scholarly attention as more popular pilgrim tales. Its composition and structure have been a matter of debate, as has its self-described theme: whether the stories are in the correct order and whether they do in fact all work collectively to reveal the Monk's conception of tragedy are standard questions for students of the Monk and his tale.<sup>9</sup> In 2000, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* published a collection of essays by Louise Fradenburg and others from a colloquium dedicated to re-examining the Monk's Tale. Since then, there have once again been fewer studies of the Monk's Tale than of the more popular pilgrim tales.

However, two interesting recent studies, both about the Monk's reference to Cenobia, are of note here. Finding in Cenobia's story values that seem not to fit the Monk as he is described in his portrait, B.W. Lindeboom argues that Cenobia is an ideal, saintly, figure who, as a contrast to the Monk, is meant to teach him a lesson: "Chaucer was ultimately striving for a self-reflecting or self-condemnatory situation, in which the Monk is implicitly or explicitly made to repudiate his fixation on this earthly life through the medium of his own Tale" (340). By contrast, observing the differences between the Monk's account of Cenobia and Boccaccio's, Keiko Hamaguchi argues that Cenobia is punished by the Monk, a victim of western and masculine power:

The Monk moves Zenobia from the Orient to the West in order to

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<sup>9</sup> On the importance of the Monk's Tale for understanding Chaucer's concept of tragedy, in addition to older, but standard, essays by Robertson (1-2, 9-11) and Kaske (259-64), see Braeger; Ramazani (272-274); and Kelly.

punish her . . . . [He] captures, describes, humiliates, and punishes the Oriental woman warrior Zenobia in order to eliminate her perversity of gender and radically alter her status . . . . Unlike Boccaccio in his treatment of Zenobia, Chaucer makes the Monk emphasize punishment and humiliation for Zenobia's cross-dressing and transgression of gender. Chaucer's assignment of the story of Zenobia to the Monk functions as Chaucer's own ironic criticism of the Monk himself: the Monk's violation of monastic codes, including Augustinian and Benedictine rules, parallels Zenobia's neglect of codes defined for her gender . . . . [But] despite his own deviation from orthodox monastic rules and from required clerical conduct, the Monk is convinced that . . . subversive sources like transgressions of gender or religion, which threaten the foundation of the monastery, must be eradicated by means of punishment. (198-199)

Both essays are thought-provoking. Yet in developing readings of the tale in light of the Monk's portrait in the General Prologue, neither really fully engages with the prologue to the tale itself.

So here I take a close look at the exchange between the Host and the Monk, thinking about the way in which Harry's reference to a wild lion in connection with his inability to tame his wife provides a context for understanding the Monk's discussion of wildness and tameness in the story of Zenobia. In terms of this theme, the similarities between the Monk and Zenobia are more important than the differences which Lindeboom discusses; and those similarities create a link between the Monk and Zenobia that is one of sympathy rather than punishment, as in Hamaguchi's more severe reading of the Monk. As with so many of Chaucer's characters, the Monk is the subject of Chaucerian satire; he is a figure of selfishness. He only tells the kinds of stories he likes, despite objections from the other pilgrims; like many story tellers, he deviates from his source text, shaping the Zenobia story to suit his purposes. His assertion of self, therefore, does come at the expense of others, including,

ironically perhaps, Cenobia, whose story he changes in order to better sympathize with her tragic self-assertion. But I will argue that, in giving the story of Cenobia to the Monk, Chaucer directs his criticism and irony at the Host as well, using the character of the Monk to explore the positive potential of *reccheless*-ness in addition to the perils of selfishness; and that the tragedy of Cenobia matters to the Monk -- and should matter to us -- because her tragic story is a meditation on the ambiguous nature of wildness and, by extension, of its binary opposite, tameness. In the wilderness of the fallen world, both wildness and tameness are needed; both are, like so many activities, institutions and individuals in Chaucer's work, replete with the potential for vice and virtue.

### III. Harry's Lion: The Host and the Monk

Before we examine how Chaucer explores the theme of wildness and tameness through the Monk's story about Cenobia, it is important to note the conversation between the Host and the Monk which precedes -- and, I will suggest, provokes the Cenobia part of -- the Monk's tale proper.

Harry has just heard the story of Prudence's patience, and he is reminded of his wife's opposite demeanor. She cannot bear any slight from anyone at Church and, when they return home, castigates Harry ("a milksop [and] a coward ape" [1910]) for not defending her honor and revenging her. Harry is worried that one day she will ask him to kill someone on her behalf, in which case he will either have to give in or fight her, both of which possibilities seem to trouble him equally.

His portrait of his wife is presumably meant to be comic. Still, it is also a self-portrait, and so meant to reinforce his own sense of his good character. The contrast is between Harry as a strong, but rational, man and his wife as an irrational, and inappropriately forceful, woman. Harry, as

master of his establishment, beats his servants, but his wife calls for their bones and backs to be broken with large clubs [1897-1900]. The slights she receives from neighbors Harry seems willing to overlook, but she demands his knife in exchange for her knitting tools so that she can have her revenge [1906-07]. Harry proudly asserts that he is “perilous” with a knife in his hand, but does not want to kill anyone. His self-portrait suggests that he has power and authority, but that he exercises both rationally, within limits. His portrait of her suggests that she desires power and authority, but lacks the self-control to exercise it wisely.

However, in his wife’s extreme view, by not exercising his will and allowing himself to be browbeaten (“overlad with every wight” [1911]), Harry becomes less than human, less even than an ape: he is a cowardly “ape”, weak like servants who are “dogges” and who deserve to be not just beaten but “slee[n]” (1899), just as her neighborhood enemies deserve to be (1917). Her language (or at least the language Harry attributes to her) is a language of authority which defines the human as entitled to passion and desire without limits, to any violence which secures its will; and which defines the animal as the subject of human authority and, if need be, of violence, as weaker because less forceful and less violent than the human.

So when Harry references the wildness of a lion, it is within this context: his comic portrait of his wife paints her as the angry woman, excessive, full of dreams of petty revenge; he, by contrast, is the hero of his marriage, the rational man who is manly enough -- enough to control his servants, to wield a knife if he has to -- but also man enough to control himself.

In confronting such a woman, his only choices are to leave the house or to fight her. He chooses the former:

And oute at dore anon I moot me dighte,  
Or elles I am but lost, but if that I

Be lik a wilde leoun, fool-hardy. (1914-16)

If he fights, he will lose because his wife is stronger, without limits to her rage and passion; he can only win if he is like a lion -- wild, reckless to the point of risking his own life ("fool-hardy"), more wild than she is.

Assuming that Harry wants to imply that he makes a choice and that it is a good choice, the implication is that his choice is the human one, the rational one. It is better to be wandering outside the house (lost) rather than to be defeated (lost) inside; better even than being inside winning as the wild lion over the wild wife, because that would be a pyrrhic victory, another kind of being lost, entailing the loss of the human and the rational. He would be foolish not only in the sense that he would need to be reckless and unthinking like a lion, but he would be a fool who has surrendered his humanity, de-evolved from his position as rational man.<sup>10</sup>

That said, we must be careful not to give Harry too much credit here, either as a deep thinker or the voice of final authority in the text. He is still a Chaucerian character and, though his wife is absent, her voice and point of view still come through to us via Harry's own words. It is unclear, for example, whether he has the choice to be a lion, to be powerful enough to overwhelm his wife, and chooses not to; or whether the situation is an impossible hypothetical, a condition he could never achieve because he really is, as his wife says, a "milk-sop." In his struggle with his wife, it is his status as the rational man (against her position as irrational woman) that is the one victory he can claim. In all else he appears weak and unmanly, tamed by a woman. Just as Harry manipulates his wife by making her a character in his narrative, so Chaucer manipulates Harry the character. The ambiguity of the lines allows us to interpret the passage as a Chaucerian joke at Harry's expense, a portrait of Harry as the man who

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<sup>10</sup> For other colorful expressions from Harry and his relation to animals, see Rudd.

is weak and impotent, resisting his forceful wife in the only way he can, when she is absent.

Harry and Harry wife's, through Harry's own mocking portrait of her, present us with opposite perspectives on the value and virtue of wildness and tamedness: for Harry, wildness is marked by irrationality, animality, and a masculinized femininity (an aggressive but unnatural masculinity lacking the control of rationality); for Harry's wife, wildness is an assertion of self and of power against false authorities and weak men who have surrendered self and power for the security of a meager, tamed, existence.

#### IV. Taming the Wild: Cenobia's Tragedy

The ambiguity, surrounding the question of whether the Host is the more human or the less manly for not confronting his wife and failing to be lion-like, is deepened when we fast-forward a few hundred lines into the Monk's Tale proper. There we find an account of Cenobia (Xenobia), a Syrian queen:

From hire childhede I fynde that she fledde  
Office of women, and to wode she wente,  
And many a wilde hertes blood she shedde  
With arwes brode that she to hem sente.  
She was so swift that she anon hem hente;  
And whan that she was elder, she wolde kille  
Leouns, leopardes, and beres al torente,  
And in hir armes weelde hem at hir wille.

She dorste wilde beestes dennes seke,  
And rennen in the montaignes al the nyght,  
And slepen under a bush, and she koude eke  
Wrastlen, by verray fore and verray myght,

With any yong man, were he never so wight.  
 Ther myghte no thyng in hire armes stonde.  
 She kepte hir maydenhod from every wight;  
 To no man deigned hire for to be bonde. (2255-2270)

Cenobia has a relation to the wild, to its open spaces and its untamed animals, similar to that of the Monk himself, who we know from the General Prologue portrait to be a hunter. Like the Monk, Cenobia flees into the wild in order to escape a daily world which is restrictive: in her case, the “office of women”; in his case, the confines of the monastery and the strict rules of his order.

As hunters and wanderers in the wild, Cenobia and the Monk are not themselves wildlings, not primitive, not without bounds. They do, however, assert their right to make their own boundaries, to determine when and how, and to what and to whom, they will be bound. Because both pursue action beyond limits normally enforced on others of their kind (other monks / men, other women), they might, from a certain point of view, seem out of control -- “reccheless” (heedless of rules, unbound to institutional order), as the Monk is described in his portrait (179). But they could also be figures to admire (as the Pilgrim Chaucer admires the Monk in the General Prologue [183]), heroes rather than rebels, madmen, or wildlings; perhaps even exemplars of virtue rather than of chaos or of vice. He is a “manly man” (167); she is a queen. They are “reccheless” not in the modern sense of dangerously out of control (“reckless”), but in the broader Middle English sense of “without concern”, a more connotatively neutral sense because the rules which they do not heed may or may not be good rules, may be rules in need of breaking or at least of revision.

The Monk decides for himself how best “the world [shal] be served” (187), selecting which rules and texts of his order he will follow and which are “nat worth an oyster” (182). Cenobia, too, takes time to study, “to lerne

bookes" (2309), that she might decide "how she in vertu myghte hir lyf dispende" (2310). She binds herself to a more conventional virtue, chastity; but unlike many medieval and Chaucerian female characters, that conviction is her own. Where she wants to break from the "office of women" and explore the wilderness, she does; and when she wants to be the ideal chaste woman, she is equally firm.

Notably, she does have to compromise at one point: whether for the good of the state or the family or the cultural norm which imagines a woman needing a husband, her "freendes" convince her to marry against her inclination (2271). She would prefer the chastity of the virgin girl, but she makes the marriage work by becoming a chaste woman. Instead of retreating into the wild, violently opposing her friends and family, she once again asserts her will without making herself an outcast. Instead of being tamed, she tames her husband:

. . . she wolde nevere assente,  
 By no wey, that he sholde by hire lye  
 But ones, for it was hir pleyn entente  
 To have a child, the world to multiplie;  
 And also soone as that she myghte espye  
 That she was nat with childe with that dede,  
 Thanne wolde she suffre hym doon his fantasye  
 Eft-soone, and nat but oones, out of drede.

And if she were with childe at thilke cast,  
 Namooore sholde he pleyen thilke game  
 Til fully fourty [wikes] weren past;  
 Thane wolde she ones suffre hym do the same.  
 Al were this Odenake wilde or tame,  
 He gat namooore of hire, for thus she seyde:  
 It was to wyves lecherie and shame,  
 In oother caas, if that men with hem pleyde. (2279-2294)

Whether her husband (Odenake) is “wilde or tame” -- sexually aroused or calmly paying the marriage debt, patient with her or angry, aggressive, forceful, out of control (wild) -- the outcome is the same. Even in marriage, Cenobia continues to practice the virtue of chastity so important to her.

No doubt her assertiveness has limits. She must choose to be either the chaste woman (dutifully, joylessly, satisfying her husband’s sexual desire) or the lecherous woman (satisfying her own); both are social conventions she must accept or risk being an outcast, a wildling. In a feminist reading of the tale, Cenobia could be read as a victim of society, unnaturally and unfairly dominated by men: perhaps she is punished, as in Hamaguchi’s interpretation, for being “a manly woman of the Orient who engages in masculine activity” (183); or perhaps her wildness -- her resistance to precedent and authority, that which made her special, strong, and so a threat to the social order -- is taken from her by a marriage which forces a radical change of character upon her.

But I suggest that in the context of the Monk’s tale, the point is that she does choose; that in taming her own desire she masters her husband and on her own terms, a mastery which she then, as queen, extends over all her subjects and foreign enemies. That her desire is tamed, that she takes no joy in sex, may seem to be a case of her bowing to social convention; but in the Monk’s version of the story, such control is a good thing, because it is her choice. She chooses to use the convention of the chaste woman against the convention of the man who takes unlimited pleasure in his wife after marriage. A wild aspect of her is tamed, in that she denies herself both sexual pleasure and the (also sensual, physical) pleasure of spending time in the wilderness, but she is the one doing the taming. Ironically, that tame part of her existence is the means by which she asserts authority and control over her husband.

While her story has connections to those of the Marriage Group earlier in the *Tales* -- no doubt the Wife could have had some words for the Monk

at this point -- in the context of the Monk's Tale and of his interest in tragedy, Cenobia's tragedy is not her marriage. Cenobia's marriage is depicted as a successful one, a comic ending in the classical sense. Her tragedy only comes later, when she is defeated by the emperor Aurelian and taken in chains to Rome:

Biforen his triumphe walketh shee,  
 With gilte cheynes on hire nekke hangynge.  
 Coroned was she, as after hir degree,  
 And of perree charged hire clothyng.

Allas, Fortune! She that whilom was  
 Dredeful to kynges and to emperoures,  
 Now gaureth al the peple on hire, allas!  
 And she that helmed was in starke stoures  
 And wan by force townes stronge and toures,  
 Shal on hir heed now were a vitremyte;  
 And she that bar the ceptre ful of floures  
 Shal bere a distaf, hire cost for to quyte. (2363-2374)

For the Monk, Cenobia is a tragic figure because, like others in the various stories he tells, she suffers a reversal of fortune (2347-50). But I suggest she is especially tragic for him because she represents one who had freedom, who challenged restraints imposed by social convention and institutions, who reflected on how best to serve the world, but who now has been tamed, assigned a station in life, a way of existing, against her will.

To be a wildling, to wander without rational thought or purpose among the wild beasts, to become an animal, is not desirable and not a virtuous life. In the two tragic tales preceding Cenobia's story, God's punishment of Nabugodonosor, later used to terrify his son, Balthasar, makes this clear. For pride and tyranny, Nabugodonosor is cast into the wild, reduced to the state and mind of an animal until God restores his wits (2167-80; 2210-22).

Cenobia, who is not punished for sins but merely defeated in battle when Fortune brings the superior army of Rome to her city, manifests a different aspect of wildness. She enjoys the wilderness, finding in it, like the Monk, a space in which to retreat from the oppressive walls of everyday life (his life as a cloistered Monk, hers as a woman and a princess). Yet the wilderness does not dominate her; she dominates it. Her exceptional strength, which she shares with the wild animals she hunts, she masters and in turn tames others. Her self-restraint is partly responsible for her ability to control others and to assert her will in a rational manner and in a way that permits her to spend her life in a virtuous way (“in vertu . . . hir lyf dispende” [2310]).

## V. In the End

The Monk leaves Cenobia to her sad, broken existence, moving on to other tragedies before the Knight finally stops his litany of depressing stories. Of all the pilgrim tales, the Knight’s own tale contains the most uses of the word “wilde”, many of those, as we noted, appearing in a negative context. Perhaps the Knight feels the Monk’s seemingly endless catalogue of short stories has gotten out of control, gone wild. Both the Knight and the Host chastise the Monk for telling only tragedies, depressing his audience (the Knight) or boring them (Harry); in either case, not following the rules of the pilgrims’ tale-telling game, which requires a tale of *sentence* but also of *solaas*. The Monk, however, true to his character as an opponent of authority and tradition, refuses to conform and rejects Harry’s offer to continue with another kind of story.

This exchange and the pilgrim audience’s criticism of such tragedies are, of course, relevant to a discussion of the nature and value of tragedy as presented by Chaucer through the Monk and in *The Canterbury Tales* as

a whole.<sup>11</sup> But the Knight's interruption and the Host's mocking also connect to the specific issue of tameness and wildness raised in Cenobia's story. Like Cenobia, the Monk in the epilogue does not merely suffer a random reversal of fortune, but a reversal of fortune caused by an authority seeking to tame him. "I have no luste to pleye," he tells Harry (2806). From the General Prologue portrait, we know the Monk has much desire for play; the point here, then, is that he will only play on his own terms and will not be told what to desire and when. His *reccheless*-ness surfaces again. Though not humiliated and bound like Cenobia, he is silenced by the Knight and Harry, a reminder that the Monk's own sad conclusion is not unlike Cenobia's tragedy, a tragedy of an expressive self constrained, of wildness tamed.

At our end here, we should return to Harry and his wife in the prologue, as I would argue that the Cenobia part of the Monk's collection of tragedies, the only one about a woman, encourages us to do so. In his General Prologue portrait the Monk is a man unwilling to be restrained; Cenobia is thus in part his critique of Harry the weak milksop, comically tamed by his shrewish wife; and is also a critique of Harry's wife, the wild shrew whose unmastered and untamed temper consumes her with thoughts of petty violence and petty revenge. Cenobia is a fusion of Harry and his wife, of what could be good in them: she is willing to compromise, to be tame in a frustrating situation, yet a leader forceful and spirited, never to be tamed. Harry and his wife seem to miss the crucial point about the relation between tameness and wildness: it is not about an absolute choice between two opposites, but is largely a matter of (rational) perspective.

In the context of Fragment VII, following upon the story of Prudence, a paragon of human patience and restraint, Cenobia is (via the Monk)

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<sup>11</sup> On the Knight's interruption, see Kaske; also, Fry.

another voice, another perspective, that Chaucer offers us as he urges us to reflect on what it means to live virtuously (as Cenobia wonders) and to serve the world (as the Monk contemplates doing). To be human, for the Monk and for Cenobia, is to remain connected to the wild, to remember it, to channel it.

Poignant, then, is the moment when the Monk imagines Aurelian taking away Cenobia's royal scepter and replacing it with a distaff, a woman's tool for spinning (2374) -- the same tool Harry's wife threatens to force him to take in exchange for his knife (1906-7). In that mirror image, we see why Harry is a comic figure but Cenobia is a tragic one. Harry is emasculated, feminized, by his wife -- but comically so, because his situation stems from his own weakness and cowardice (tameness). Cenobia the Queen, a somewhat masculine figure, wild for a woman, is reduced to the status of an average woman by a man who defeated her in battle -- tragically so, because her situation stems from a turn of fortune (the rise of a stronger Roman army), not from her wildness or unconventionality. Being tame (like Harry) is comic, but being tamed like Cenobia is tragic.

Her tragedy is that the ideal human relation she had to the wild -- where she was master, but without sacrificing her human virtues (such as chastity) -- is destroyed when she is made a slave in Rome, broken and tamed. To eliminate the wild -- in the sense of *reccheless*-ness, of self-assertion that questions and resists ideas or institutions because they may not be for the best -- on that scale is, for the Monk and perhaps for Chaucer, tragic, for it is the loss not only of the wild, but potentially of the human. That it is the willful Monk, rejecting his source text's happy ending for Cenobia, who subjects her to this tragedy in order to assert his own concept of the tragic, is yet one more Chaucerian wrinkle recalling us to the ambiguous value of *reccheless*-ness, to the need to reflect, in a Chaucerian manner, from multiple perspectives on complex, morally challenging, forces such as wildness.

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**ABSTRACT**

**Chaucer on Wildness: The Host, the Monk, and the Tragedy of Cenobia**

**John Lance Griffith**

Through a close reading of the Host's remarks in the prologue to the Monk's Tale and their relation to the Monk's subsequent discussion of the tragic queen Cenobia, this essay examines Chaucer's concept of the wild and of wildness. It argues that the Monk's inclusion of Cenobia, the only woman in his collection of tragedies, is in part a response to Harry's comments about his own uncontrollable wife; and that, for Chaucer and his readers, the exchange between the Host and the Monk is a meditation on *reccheless*-ness, a wildness of character which can manifest both as virtue and as vice in an individual and the community.

**Key Words** | Chaucer, The Monk's Tale, Cenobia (Zenobia), wildness, tameness