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WHY DAME RAGNELL HAD TO DIE  
FEMININE USURPATION OF MASCULINE AUTHORITY IN  
"THE WEDDING OF SIR GAWAIN AND DAME RAGNELL"

*Mary Leech*

Dame Ragnell is a unique character within the Loathly Lady tales. Unlike other Loathly Ladies who are transformed into beautiful women, such as the ugly woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," the hag of "The Tale of Florent," or the loathly bride of "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," Dame Ragnell, the Loathly Lady from "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell," continues to exert unladylike power once she becomes beautiful until she dies and is, in a sense, transformed again through death. There are several elements in the Dame Ragnell story that do not appear in other Loathly Lady tales. Besides the brief continuation of her story after her transformation and the description of her death, Dame Ragnell is the only Loathly Lady who is named; she is also the only Loathly Lady whose physicality is related in lengthy and graphic detail, along with her voracious appetite and appalling table manners.

Gawain as well is unusual in this story. Unlike the other knights in the Loathly Lady tales, Gawain has no obvious flaw. Gawain never acts unchivalrously; he is never discourteous to anyone, not even the hideous Dame Ragnell; he never argues with Arthur, nor does he ever sway from his duty to his king. Gawain searches for answers to Arthur's problems just as willingly as he accepts the solution of having to marry Dame Ragnell. The great contrast between the beastlike Dame Ragnell and the perfect chivalrous knight in Gawain points to two seemingly contradictory natures forced together within a community that must accept them both as part of their social identity. Even when the Loathly Lady transforms into a beautiful woman, the contrast in natures remains. Only when the disruptive facet of feminine authority is stripped of its agency is the community once again at ease with itself.

The supposed danger that this "other" facet represents to the established, idealized social order is not necessarily a defined defect that can be overcome. Through theories of social order and disorder, particularly in the works of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and anthropologist Mary Douglas, I will explore the contradiction in the ideal world of Arthur that the extended ending of "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell" may represent and will demonstrate how this ending may be understood as a commentary on the tenuous nature of civilized manners and authority.

With the detailed portrayal of her "mouthe fulle wide and foulle y-grown," and her "yallowe teethe" that are "as boris tuskes" and "hing overe her lippes,"<sup>1</sup> Dame Ragnell presents the gaping orifices described by Bakhtin in his work on the grotesque. Bakhtin refers to grotesque bodies as bodies "in the act of becoming" which reflect part of "a cosmic hierarchy."<sup>2</sup> The misshapen and sagging body of the Bakhtinian grotesque displays what is usually hidden in the body—its interior—and in so doing challenges the boundaries of the body and the society from which that body emerges. The classical body is contained, confined and hidden; the grotesque body defiantly revealed, and revealing.

Bakhtin's grotesque challenges the society that creates it. By presenting those parts of the body that are normally enclosed, the grotesque body forces a culture to observe images (and the ideas those images represent) that are usually unseen. As Bakhtin states, "the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body.... The outward and inward features are often merged into one."<sup>3</sup> The grotesque body becomes its own entity, one that is both inward and outward, life-giving and life-taking, cosmic and earthbound. It eliminates the differentiation between what is acceptable to a particular culture and what is not.<sup>4</sup> The "act of becoming" and the revelatory nature of the grotesque body point to the uncontrolled or the feared aspects of the world outside the societal order. Because of this fear of the unknown, these liminal grotesque figures inspire distrust and unease at what may lie beyond regulated space, particularly if such characters represent aspects of the culture that it would rather not be forced to acknowledge.<sup>5</sup>

In most cases, however, particularly in the similar stories of "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell," "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and "The Tale of Florent," the Loathly Lady works to help the knight.<sup>6</sup> Though she has ulterior motives, the motives are not to destroy or injure the knight, but more often to return herself to her

normally beautiful (and therefore closed and nonthreatening) body. Still, the existence of figures that draw attention to the shadowy places of a culture's values and morals is initially disturbing. The reinforcement of the social values at the end of the tales restores some comfort to a culture that has been confronted with its deepest fears and shown that there is a potential threat to social order.

Dame Ragnell's face, body, and manners, by far the most vivid in all the Loathly Lady tales, materialize the Bahktinian threat. While Chaucer and Gower both describe their Loathly Ladies in general terms,<sup>7</sup> Dame Ragnell's physical ugliness is given in great detail.<sup>8</sup> Even in "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," the description of the hag is not nearly as detailed as the description of Dame Ragnell.<sup>9</sup> With her "boris tuskes" and "pappis" that hang like "an hors lode," the beastlike appearance of this woman harkens back to female monsters of mythological literature, creatures like the dog-monster Scylla or the serpentine Medusa, monsters that threatened to annihilate the civilized nature of men. Manuel Aguirre compares such disruptive women to Circe,<sup>10</sup> who is "forever welcoming new men into her palace only to turn them into beasts."<sup>11</sup> During the Middle Ages, the metaphoric dynamics of mythology are remodeled into views that substantiate prevalent notions of feminine inferiority. With what Aguirre calls the concept of "Sovereignty of Reason,"<sup>12</sup> the patriarchal values of the Middle Ages are reinforced, so that "woman's 'proper' role more and more becomes that of submissive lover, faithful wife, unassuming servant. And if she does not comply with this injunction, she will be typecast as the shrewish, malevolent woman whose purpose seems to be to wreak havoc in an otherwise well-ordered society."<sup>13</sup> Dame Ragnell's appearance at court overrides concerted social outrage, horror, and failed attempts to curb her will. Although she is greeted with sighs and curses, she succeeds in her orchestrated public display of herself, and she attains clear authority within the masculine culture of King Arthur's court.

The Loathly Lady is not just ugly; she is deformed. Since she cannot be a viable commodity for marriage, she is not marketable. Because she is disgusting, she is not subject to the same regulatory standards as beautiful women. The Loathly Lady is therefore accorded a certain amount of freedom not otherwise permitted to a woman. This usurped authority is considered at least as loathsome and obscene as the lady herself. The Loathly Lady seeks reintegration to the very society that she disrupts: her influence, which comes from her transformed state and not her original state, is normally limited once again when she returns to her beautiful form.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> She is taken out of the public realm and relegated to a private sphere within the home.<sup>16</sup> Georges Duby explains this separation of space in terms of the desire for social control through marriage: "[T]he institution of marriage, by its very position and by the role in which it assumes, enclosed in a rigid framework of rituals and prohibitions—rituals because it involves publishing, that is, making public, and thereby socializing and legalizing a private act, and prohibitions because it involves setting boundaries between the norm and the marginal, the licit and the illicit, the pure and the unpure."<sup>17</sup> Women in the home were safe, private, and conventionalized. Women outside this sphere, especially those who did not have the potential or the desire to be normalized, presented a tangible threat as they cross the boundary between "the licit and the illicit," and in doing so challenge the rigors of such a social order.

Rigid social order, Mary Douglas points out, especially in societies that hold to strong gender distinctions and restrictions on sexual behavior, often leads to strident beliefs concerning what is sexually dirty or polluted: "Another kind of sex pollution arises from the desire to keep straight the internal lines of the social system.... A third type may arise from the conflict in the aims which can be proposed in the same culture."<sup>18</sup> If the body of the Loathly Lady, particularly the appallingly deformed body of Dame Ragnell, is outside of controlled sexual politics, then its very existence menaces not just sexuality controlled through marriage but the community that seeks to exert such control.<sup>19</sup> Yet the unusual image of Dame Ragnell may indicate a flaw (or flaws) within the Arthurian court unrelated to her intrusion.

Deformed or hideous figures may serve a protective function in a society, but these figures are still placed outside the borders of a culture and are viewed as part of the margins they guard against. In an article relating Celtic mythology and Arthurian lore, Lorraine Kochanske Stock compares the Loathly Lady to representations of Celtic Sheela-na-gigs. These figures, found primarily on religious and civic structures, emphasize femininity through exaggerated portrayals of female genitalia. Though Stock draws her comparison between the Sheela figures and Morgan le Fay of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, much of what she describes relates to Dame Ragnell as well. The dominant physical features of the Sheela-na-gig include "disfigured facial features; pulled up shoulders; small, flat, or lopsided breasts; long arms and prominent hands; and diminutive, foreshortened legs emerging from an over-

sized buttocks.”<sup>20</sup> Stock describes clawlike hands that form “spaces suggesting the toothy ‘mouth’ of the *vagina dentata*, which mirrors the toothy grin or grimace of her hideous face.”<sup>21</sup> The emphasis on Dame Ragnell’s yellow teeth and boarlike tusks relate to this type of threatening sexual imagery, yet a disruptive sexual nature is associated with all women as fallen daughters of Eve. The sexuality of Dame Ragnell, and of Loathly Ladies in general, is no more or less disturbing than her presence in civilized society. The transgressive act of the Loathly Lady, while sexual in part, transcends sex and points instead towards social functions of gendered roles.

Stock further claims that the “apotropaic function of the Sheela—guarding castles or towns; warding off threats by brazen vulvic exhibition ... endowed these figures with a power parallel to and perhaps derived from, the force attributed to various Celtic goddess figures, foremost among which is the war goddess Morrigan.”<sup>22</sup> Associated with Sheela figures, then, is a feminine incursion over a primarily masculine realm.<sup>23</sup> Despite the images of Sheelas being used for protection, they seem to have associations with a great and dangerous essence that is being directed outside of the castle or town, or that is being prevented from entering. These images, then, ostensibly used for protection, are threatening enough that they must remain outside the social boundaries.

Yet the Loathly Lady must be invited into the community from the outside because of a vital service she can give: the answer to the riddle that will save the knight’s life. Despite the public horror at her, she is needed within the closed structure of the court to preserve the ideals of the society that are represented in the endangered knight. Again there is a contradiction presented within the goals of the society: to preserve the ideals of the culture, it must open itself up to something that it fears as contaminative of its central values.

In this case, the boundary crossing is initiated by the masculine, and not restricted to the feminine protagonist. In all the English Loathly Lady tales, a knight (or king) has been given a quest, the seemingly impossible task of discovering what women want. Each of the knights has crossed the moral boundaries of society.<sup>24</sup> To atone for this transgression, authority is taken away from the knight and put in the hands of another. If the knight and/or king is to regain that authority, he must solve the riddle or forfeit his life.<sup>25</sup> Even before the Loathly Lady arrives on the scene, the highest representative of the masculine world has been taken outside the safety of ordered society and faced with a lethal threat. The circumstances that permit the Loathly

Lady to gain her authority originate from a masculine breach of boundaries rather than a feminine intrusion into the ordered society.

The danger that these open and revealing women represent in these tales is situated away from the recognized social structure. Dame Ragnell and the ugly old women of "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," and "The Tale of Florent" are all found in the woods,<sup>26</sup> a traditionally marginal place with unknown forces at work. As Douglas notes, "To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power."<sup>27</sup> The margins are not governable; there is no control there, no comforting order. Anything or anyone who lives outside the community in the liminal spaces has survived the unknown, controlled the uncontrollable, and faced what is feared. In this experience of knowing what should not be known comes power.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the Loathly Lady, that power is in knowing the answer to the riddle that saves the knight's life.<sup>29</sup>

The perversion of the male/female relationship represented by the Loathly Lady mirrors other challenges to social order as well, including class structure. In both "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "Florent," the Loathly Lady is seen as noble only after she becomes beautiful. Part of the tradition of the Loathly Lady holds that she is common.<sup>30</sup> The Loathly Lady in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is "low-bred." Her clothes and wedding garments are not mentioned. The hag in "Florent" is "in ragges" and "tortore" (lines 1721–22). At the wedding, her rags are taken off, and "She hadde bath, sche hadde reste, / And was arraied to the beste" (lines 1747–48). However, "with no craft of combes brode / Thei myhte hire hore lockes schode" (lines 1749–50). Though she has the clothes of a noble woman and has washed away some of the common dirt on her, the tale emphasizes that while she is loathly, her lower status remains, as seen in the inability to comb or tame her hair. The Loathly Lady in "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" is clad "in red scarlet," rather than the tattered rags of other Loathly Ladies. No definitive identification of her status is given, but she chastises Arthur for his lack of courtesy in greeting her. While these characteristics may not confirm a noble status, they do demonstrate that she expects to be treated like a lady despite the fact that Arthur does not see her as noble and barely sees her as human.

In contrast to her hideous appearance, Dame Ragnell "sat on a palfray was gay begon, / With gold beset and many a precious stone" (lines 246–47). At her wedding, "She was arrayd in the riches maner, / More fresher than Dame Gaynour; / Her arrayment was worthe three thousand mark" (lines 590–93): she is not only dressed well, but her clothes are better than Guinevere's. Just as Dame Ragnell's foulness is described in more detail than

in any other story, so her clothes are described as more costly than in any other tale. Even in the woods she has a richly arrayed horse (and presumably she is as well dressed as the horse), indicating a noble station. Clothing was important sign of social rank, used to signal, maintain, control, and transform social identity<sup>31</sup> based on class distinction. From the first appearance of Dame Ragnell, she posits herself as noble and insists on the treatment and public display befitting a noblewoman. She even appropriates the place of the feminine pinnacle of the male society: the queen.

In the scenes before her marriage, the disruptive force of Dame Ragnell becomes more and more apparent. Dame Ragnell arrives in fine clothes and with an entourage, which includes Arthur. Upon entering, she passes him, which "liked the king fulle ille" (line 520). Though Arthur does not like her presumption, Dame Ragnell, by passing Arthur, refuses to remain inconspicuous. At no point is Dame Ragnell subject to the will of the court: she rides in as she wishes, she is married when and where she wishes, she marries whom she wishes, she is dressed as she wishes, and she eats where and how she wishes. Her will prevails at all times because of the debt of honor Arthur owes her. She is a "foule unswete," a form of social pollution, but to refuse her entry to the court would deny the very precepts of chivalry that define the court of Arthur.

Forms of social pollution, according to Douglas, can be divided into categories: threats from outside the social system, threats from the inside, threats from the margins, and, lastly, "internal contradiction, when some of the basic postulates are denied by other basic postulates, so that at certain points the system seems to be at war with itself."<sup>32</sup> Dame Ragnell, whose grotesqueness is the most vividly described, is also the best dressed, both in the woods and at court. She is not a typical incursive figure, one attempting to bring lower class pollution into the noble community, nor is she pollution from within the community as she comes from outside the social structure. Her knowledge, gained on the margins of society, enables her to permanently tie herself to the model of chivalric society: Gawain. Dame Ragnell's ability to enter Arthurian society presents a myriad of contradictions and reveals a social system at odds with itself.

Even before she becomes beautiful, Dame Ragnell has begun to transform herself into something socially acceptable.<sup>33</sup> Once she enters court she has adopted all the outer trappings of a noble, and the other nobles are forced to accept her in this role, no matter how repulsed they are by her. The courtiers recognize that she does not belong, but they have no power to reject her,



demonstrating that the contradiction she represents is not within her but within the society that allows her performance to succeed as it does.

Unlike the other tales, this one emphasizes the public nature of Dame Ragnell's entrance to court. Duby's discussion about the public ritualizing of marriage as a method of socially legitimizing a private act is relevant here as well.<sup>34</sup> A private marriage early in the day will not place Dame Ragnell in the social position she desires. That this public display is necessary to break the curse inflicted on her by her stepmother makes the stepmother oddly complicitous in the usurpation of masculine culture. Feminine agency in performance, then, and not the masculine regulation of that performance, becomes a central part of the Dame Ragnell tale.<sup>35</sup>

Often the public display of a woman, particularly a beautiful woman, denotes control of her, a turning of the woman into an object of desire and pleasure.<sup>36</sup> Here, the roles of object and objectifier are reversed, as Dame Ragnell insists on being made an object of pleasure and desire, but her hideous appearance and appalling table manners would seem to defeat this purpose: everyone is horrified by her, yet they all must respond to her in the way she intends. The reaction to her is not as important as the fact that she controls her own public display by her very insistence on it. Rather than being controlled or diminished by her assumed role as an object, Dame Ragnell shows power by being able to place herself in the position of desired object when she clearly is not desirable in any way.

Later, once she is beautiful, she again fills the role of desired object when Arthur enters Gawain's and her bedroom: "She stood in her smock alle by that fire; / her here was to her knees as red as gold wire" (lines 742-43). As she supervised her own placement and performance at her wedding, Dame Ragnell controls her role as desired object by voluntarily placing herself in that part rather than being placed there by either Gawain or Arthur. In this way, she usurps the power of the objectifier and places it within the purview of the objectified, once again upsetting the normal balance of power. Social order has been disrupted, not just by her appalling physical appearance, but also by her manipulation of the power structures within the established social order, both before and after her transformation.

Yet this subversion begins before she enters the tale. From the beginning of the Dame Ragnell tale, the credibility of masculine authority is called into question. In many ways, Arthur acts in a manner that is not entirely kingly. First, he insists on hunting the deer alone. In other tales, hunting is an activity that indicated knightly fellowship. The Green Knight of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* hunts each day with his men, and all participate in the

hunt together. The Green Knight only goes after the boar alone when it becomes clear the boar will hurt or even kill his men if he does not take action. Even so, the men ride with him as they chase the boar and witness his killing of it. In *Erec and Enide*, one of the activities Erec forgoes to be with his new wife is hunting, which again is presented as a homosocial group activity. Gawain himself is chastised after his marriage to Dame Ragnell for not hunting or jousting with the other knights. Hunting was, as John Cummins explains, a sport of noble pageantry: "In the eyes of the late Middle Ages kings and noblemen are not as other men are; the structure of society which sets them apart is divinely ordained, and their superiority must be made clear by pomp, pageant, ceremony, procession, and other physical glories."<sup>37</sup> The hunt was part of this noble pageantry, as the "dead boar or deer was often brought home with fanfares and triumph."<sup>38</sup> The hunt clearly had social functions of establishing the higher station of the nobility, establishing camaraderie among knights and honing skills necessary for combat.

In the Dame Ragnell tale, though, Arthur appears to want to hunt this spectacular animal alone in order to show his prowess: "Hold you stille, every man, / And I wille go myself, if I can / With crafte of stalking" (lines 28–30). He forgoes the unity of the hunt and attempts to enter combat on his own to satisfy his desire to test his individual "crafte." His subsequent humiliation at being taken prisoner by Sir Gromer warns against the foolishness of abandoning one's comrades while outside of the societal order. Arthur's performance here as king is less convincing than Dame Ragnell's later performance as an honored member of the court, despite his place and status within proper court society.

When he meets Sir Gromer, Gromer appears to have a legitimate grievance with Arthur, as he says to Arthur: "Thou hast gevin my landes in certain / With great wrong unto Sir Gawen" (lines 58–59). Arthur never contests this charge, nor does the poem ever indicate that Sir Gromer's accusation is unfounded. Instead, Arthur is able to put off Gromer by saying "To slee me here honour getist thou no delle" (line 65). He does not challenge Gromer to fair combat<sup>39</sup> or defend himself verbally. His tactic is to manipulate Gromer by appealing to his honor.<sup>40</sup> That Gromer capitulates to Arthur's speech about honor may also imply that Gromer is indeed an honorable knight who has been wronged somehow, or at least feels he has been wronged, and that the alleged wrong has not been addressed.<sup>41</sup> Throughout this scene, Arthur does not act with any kingly authority or with any of the qualities one might expect in an honorable and noble knight.

The question of honor is pertinent to the Loathly Lady tales. In "The Wife of Bath's Tale," the knight has raped a maiden and therefore must make amends. The knight who once imposed his will on an unwilling maiden is forced to relinquish control to his wife and be a better man for it. In "The Tale of Florent," Florent must learn humility after killing the son of a military captain. After he hands decision-making over to his wife, he is absolved of the sin of pride by a priest. In both of these tales,<sup>42</sup> the riddle has a clear relationship to a moral transgression, and the choice given to the knight by the Loathly Lady demonstrates that each knight has developed the virtues he lacked at the beginning of the story.

In "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell," Gawain has not acted immorally at any time. Arthur is the one who was given the riddle, so he is the one who supposedly committed the moral transgression, yet Gawain is the one who surrenders authority to his wife. Of course Arthur cannot marry the Loathly Lady because of Guinevere, but normally a king would take moral responsibility for a subject, not the other way around. Here Gawain appears to take on whatever moral responsibility comes with the riddle. Because the lesson of the riddle is not apparent, there is no clear triumph in the surrender of sovereignty, although Gawain is rewarded for his loyalty to Arthur. There is no repentance demonstrated, nor is there any spiritual growth. The disruption and the lessons or warnings within the riddle may be more usefully explored through Dame Ragnell herself and not in the patriarchal traditions of morality and masculine virtue.

As a symbol,<sup>43</sup> the Loathly Lady would seem to represent a needed change within the social structure, as seen in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" when the Loathly Lady lectures the knight on what true nobility and wealth are, and in "The Tale of Florent" when Florent repents of his pride and learns humility.<sup>44</sup> Dame Ragnell, though, does not function in exactly the same way. While her presence challenges the accepted social structure, she also insists on acceptance by using conventions of the very culture that recoils from her. She is a figure of grotesque revelation and sexual perversion garbed in the outer trappings of a lady, one who is married in full ceremony at High Mass, who seeks to release her voracious sexual appetite within the bonds of matrimony. As a grotesque figure, Dame Ragnell challenges norms and reveals fears. With her body in a state of continual fluctuation and formation, she acts as a regenerative signifier of problems within the social structure that are also in a process of continual flux and reformation. There is no specific lesson to be learned because the faults are constantly in flux within the social structure itself.

The mutability of the danger Dame Ragnell represents is most clear after she transforms. When Gawain does not appear at court, Arthur becomes concerned, as he says, "I am fulle ferd of Sir Gawen, / Nowe lest the fende have him slain; / Nowe wold I fain preve" (lines 725–27). After Arthur has seen the transformed Dame Ragnell, he again says "I wenid, Sir Gawen, she wold thee have miscaried; / Therefore in my hart I was sore agrevid; / But the contrary is here seen" (lines 754–56). Here, Arthur fears the usurpation of power she displayed at the wedding and at the feast. Gawain, as Arthur's champion and defender, represents the main source of masculine power at the court of Arthur, both physically and morally. Whether he fears that Dame Ragnell has devoured Gawain vaginally as she devoured food at the feast (her "boris tuskes" as the *vagina dentata*), or just exhausted him through excessive sex,<sup>45</sup> is not clear or important. Arthur's concern clearly shows that he believes she has the potential to control and even destroy Gawain, and in turn the very essence of Arthurian masculine power.

The sexual politics of marriage, especially medieval marriage, were arranged to benefit the male more than the female, and to address masculine fears about feminine sexuality.<sup>46</sup> Foucault, in *The Uses of Pleasure*, discusses the importance of the economic and political factors concerning sexual roles and sexual behavior within marriage. Monogamy for men had a different meaning than it did for women: "In the case of the woman, it was insofar as she was under the authority of her husband that this obligation was imposed on her. In the man's case, it was because he exercised authority and because he was expected to exhibit self-mastery in the use of this authority by limiting his sexual options. For the wife, having sexual relations only with her husband was a consequence of the fact that she was under his control. For the husband, having sexual relations only with his wife was the most elegant way of exercising his control."<sup>47</sup> Monogamous sexual activity within marriage, then, is supposed to be a sign that the man is in control of not only his wife, but the household as well. Duby's discussion on medieval marriage and sexual politics would indicate the same sort of concerns seen in the methods of governance over women both inside and outside of marriage.

Dame Ragnell's behavior and influence over Gawain indicate otherwise. Once they are alone, Dame Ragnell is the one who initiates sex by urging Gawain to show her "cortesy in bed." She is the one who directs every aspect of the marriage, from its inception to its consummation; there is no time that she is ever made to act against her will by any male figure in the story, not even by her husband or the king. Her monogamy, then, does not indicate Gawain's control over her so much as it demonstrates her power over him.

Ragnell's reformed beauty is even more threatening to patriarchal hierarchy than her breach of social codes. Gawain is more affected by his wife when she is beautiful than he ever is when she is ugly. Unlike the knights in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Tale of Florent," Gawain never complains about nor resists Dame Ragnell. He readily agrees to the marriage, saying he would "wed her and wed her again ... Though she were as foulle as Belsabub" (lines 343, 354) even before he has seen the creature Arthur calls "the foulis lady / That evere I sawe sertenly" (lines 336–37). Gawain gives no reaction upon seeing Dame Ragnell for the first time, even when everyone else at court is horrified by her entrance and appearance. In the bedroom, when she asks him for a kiss, he responds by saying "I wol do more / Then for to kisse, and God before!" (lines 638–39). Gawain acts out of loyalty to Arthur, and therefore as a loyal knight he is bound by honor to fulfill his word. Nevertheless, there is no reaction from him until Dame Ragnell becomes beautiful, when he asks her, "whate are ye?"<sup>48</sup> Though he quickly rejoices at his good fortune, he seems more alarmed at the danger of a beautiful woman than an ugly one. While Dame Ragnell was ugly, she was not a sexual creature to Gawain: he married her out of obligation and was about to consummate the marriage out of the same obligation to his king. The dynamic here was masculine and within the social performance of male hierarchy. Once Dame Ragnell transforms, she becomes a sexual temptress, a daughter of Eve that leads men away from spiritual purity (seen as part of masculine nature). Gawain's quick capitulation to her temptation and his forsaking of masculine society reveals an inherent weakness in the male hierarchy of Arthur's court.

After she becomes beautiful, Dame Ragnell again takes control of the situation by giving Gawain the choice of whether to have her beautiful during the day and ugly by night, or ugly by day and beautiful by night. Gawain is in effect being offered control over Dame Ragnell's body. When Gawain gives the decision back to Dame Ragnell, he returns control of her body to her, and in doing this re-establishes the power she has wielded up to this point. With no moral transgression to correct, Gawain, by giving the decision to Dame Ragnell, hands over his sexual control and marital authority as well. Gawain's reluctance to leave his bed and go to his king demonstrates the depth of his wife's sexual power over him.

Dame Ragnell is made beautiful, as "She was recovered of that that she was defoiled" (line 710); the couple "made mirthe" until day, "And than wold rise that faire maye" (line 716). She explains that she was cursed by her stepmother,<sup>49</sup> who "defoiled" her:

And shold have bene oderwise understond,  
Evin tille the best of Englund  
Had wedded me verament  
And also he shold geve me the sovereinté  
Of alle his body and goodes, sicurly.

(lines 694–98)

When the work of her stepmother has been overcome, Dame Ragnell is made whole again, yet the stipulation attached to her return to wholeness (a closed, proper, submissive body) is for Gawain to surrender himself, in body and spirit, to the will of Dame Ragnell. Here, the breaking of the feminine curse by male sexuality (i.e., power) should signal Dame Ragnell's submission to the male hierarchy and the return to social stability. Instead, Dame Ragnell once again becomes a figure that follows the surface rules of the culture, but the contradiction in her appearance and behavior points to inconsistencies within these social expectations.

On the surface, she performs all the acts of a dutiful wife: she promises to never "wrathe thee" and to be always "obaisaunt"; her beauty wins the approval of the court and the queen; and she goes to all the feasts where she "bare away the bewtye," bringing honor to her husband as a wife should. While she does keep her husband in bed with her "bothe day and night," Dame Ragnell also does other things that are possibly far more dangerous than just weakening Gawain's performance as a knight. Her sphere of influence goes beyond Gawain, as she exerts power over her brother, Sir Gromer, and even Arthur, and this power does not disappear when she becomes beautiful.

Even after her marriage, Dame Ragnell performs the role of ideal courtly woman, yet in doing so she reshapes the masculine court of Arthur to conform to her specifications; in other words, as she has done before, Dame Ragnell places herself in the role she wants to perform. Arthur's formal presentation of Dame Ragnell in her socially acceptable form, the public acceptance of the marriage, and Dame Ragnell's own personal vows to be "obaisaunt," should take away her last remnants of independence. The culturally sanctioned role of a conventional woman and wife, however, is not the part Dame Ragnell chooses to play. Though "Gawen lovid that lady Dame Ragnell, / In alle his life he lovid none so welle" (lines 805–6), he takes this love too far: "As a coward he lay by her bothe day and night. / Nevere would he haunt justing arighte" (lines 809–10). Dame Ragnell's ability to

control Gawain through excessive sex shows that the feminine ability to tempt is stronger than the masculine ability to control feminine agency.

As for her behavior towards Arthur, Dame Ragnell uses the obligations of chivalry to her advantage.<sup>50</sup> When Dame Ragnell makes the request to Arthur to “be good lord” to her brother, Sir Gromer, “She praid the king for his gentilnes” (line 811). Just as Arthur did with Gromer, Dame Ragnell uses the notion of knightly honor to coerce someone who presumably has power over her to her will. By prefacing her request with a reminder of his obligation to her as a chivalrous lord and knight (not to mention her saving of his life), Dame Ragnell ensures the answer she desires. Arthur responds “that shalle I nowe for your sake,” thereby acknowledging his obligation to grant her request.

Dame Ragnell’s request also places her brother under her control, though her ability to undermine his trap for Arthur already shows her mastery over him. The image that she presented from the start has not really altered. When ugly, she wore the clothes of a noble; as a beautiful woman, she retains the authority she had when she was ugly. She cannot be governed by any of the conventional methods of society, and so she must be transformed again in a way that allows the culture, or, more specifically, the masculine culture, to reclaim control over her. Dame Ragnell is the only Loathly Lady to die after she becomes beautiful. How, then, does Ragnell’s death transform her into a malleable figure that no longer presents a challenge to any of the culture’s masculine virtues or authority?

Part of the answer may be seen in the formation of Christian icons as a means of controlling beliefs of the Christian people. Peter Brown explains that icons could “be heightened by the capacity of the silent portrait of the dead to take an even heavier charge of urgency and idealization without answering back.”<sup>51</sup> As the Church came to realize in its presentation of icons such as Mary, icons and ideals were much easier to control than living persons.

This same theory works with the ideal lady of romances as well, for if the lady (in the image of Mary) is ideally chaste, she is perfect only for so long as she is unattainable. Once she is attained, as Dame Ragnell eagerly is, the ideal is gone. In this case, even in an ideal form and married, Dame Ragnell still presents a threat to masculine purity, order, and identity. In her loathly state, though Arthur, Gawain, and the court of nobles must acknowledge her place among them, her actions at court distance her from the other nobles. She is seen as a repugnant creature. After her change, her power, her forceful nature, her ability to exert influence has not gone away, despite the fact that

she now has the physical appearance of a lady and claims that she wants to behave like a good wife. If anything, her authority is more subversive, as she is able to control the men around her in a less obvious and more insidious way.

Once Dame Ragnell dies, however, she can be molded into what is necessary to reinforce the social structure and identity already established, rather than challenging it as she did while alive. Gawain is said to grieve for Ragnell for the rest of his life, since, "In her life she grevid him never; / Therfor as nevere woman to him lever" (lines 823–24).<sup>52</sup> Yet, not even ten lines earlier, he is called a coward because he stays in bed with her all day and ignores his hunting and jousting. As a dead wife, one who no longer keeps him from the company of the other knights, she becomes the perfect wife just as she had promised. Her status as an iconic figure is emphasized just a few lines later: "Gawen was wedded oft in his days; / But so welle he nevere lovid woman always, / As I have hard men sayn" (lines 832–34). Out of all the wives Gawain has after her, she becomes the best loved, the favorite, the penultimate ideal.

In death, she can be made compliant. Gawain idolizes her for the rest of his life, just as a Christian knight of romance was supposed to worship the unattainable lady. In this scenario, though, Gawain can reconfigure her in his memories. In life, her physical presence cannot be ignored or manipulated. Whether ugly or beautiful, she exerts influence over the men and events around her, which makes her dangerous in too many ways. As an icon, she is reduced to her orthodox exterior that can be resignified into a more acceptable role by those she once dominated. Her interior motives, power, and control are gone, and only the conventional outer shell remains.

Arthur as well is able to reclaim his authority. Dame Ragnell is no longer physically there to remind him of his debt to her, and he is able to reshape her in the same way Gawain does. Arthur publicly confirms her iconic status: "She was the fairest lady of alle Englonde, / When she was on live, I understand; / So said Arthoure the king" (lines 826–28). When she was alive, it was the queen who validated her beauty, as Arthur could not honorably praise a living woman's beauty over his wife's. In death, she poses no threat to Arthur's loyalty to his wife, so he can praise her as he would praise any other iconic or ideal figure. Alive, she was a constant reminder of how she saved Arthur's life and the debt he owed her. In death, she becomes an almost saintly patron—one that can be praised and flattered, but cannot demand anything in return.



As a Loathly Lady tale, "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell" offers several twists to the normal signification of the shape-shifter. Dame Ragnell's purpose is not to reinforce knightly virtue or correct serious moral faults, but rather to point out the flaws within the masculine social identity itself. Like the Sheela door guardians, she must be placed outside again, where her threat and influence can no longer disrupt cultural values and may even work to reinforce them. Masculine authority is reaffirmed and the troublesome female grotesque is transmuted into an iconic ideal of patriarchal womanhood. For this final transformation, Dame Ragnell must die.

## NOTES

1. All quotations from "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell" are taken from Donald Sands's edition, *Middle English Verse Romances*.

2. See Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 316–19.

3. Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 318.

4. Bahktin details the relationships within medieval carnival figures to laughter, hierarchy, and idealism in the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 1–58. See particularly pp. 4–17.

5. The suspicion of liminal spaces and the fear of what may exist beyond the boundaries of social structure are discussed in detail by Mary Douglas in her work *Purity and Danger*. Marginal figures "are somehow left out in the patterning of society [and so] are placeless. They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable." Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 95.

6. Even a figure such as Morgan le Fay in SGGK, though she sets out to humiliate Guinevere, eventually ends up verifying the exemplary traits of Arthur's best knight, and therefore Arthur himself.

7. Chaucer states about the hag: "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" ("WBT," line 999); Chaucer quotations are taken from Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*. Gower describes his hag as "A lothly wommannysch figure, / That for to speke of fleisch and bon / So foul yit syh he nevere non" (lines 1530–33). Quotations of "The Tale of Florent" are taken from Peck's 1968 edition of the *Confessio Amantis*.

8. The descriptions of Loathly Ladies do not tend to dwell on physical details as much as the implications of social intrusion. G. H. Maynadier mentions that in the ballad "Kempy Kay," the "deformity of a woman as well as that of her lover, is given in nauseating detail; and this is almost all there is to the story" ("Wife of Bath's Tale," p. 143). Maynadier also claims that this ballad may be related to the Loathly Lady tales. For a full version of the ballad, see Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ballad 33. For a fuller discussion of the parallels between the Loathly Lady motif in tales and ballads, see Mary Shaner's article, "A Jungian Approach to the Ballad 'King Henry,'" included in the present volume.

9. In this tale, the Loathly Lady is described as having an eye "there as shold have stood her mouth" (line 57) and another "was in her forehead fast" (line 59). Further, "Her nose was crooked and turnd outward, / Her mouth stood foule awry" (lines 61–62). Other than that, "A worse formed lady than shee was, / Never man saw with his eye" (lines 63–64), and later she is described as "misshapen." All quotations of "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" are taken from Thomas Hahn's *Sir Gawain*.

10. Circe is the sorceress in *The Odyssey* who turned Odysseus's men into swine.

11. Aguirre, "Roots of the Symbolic Role," p. 62.

12. Aguirre uses this term to refer to the reduction of the sovereignty of women in ancient and medieval literary traditions. In ancient Irish and Germanic mythology, women drew power and "sovereignty" from their representation of the power of earth, as seen in the process of life and death. In medieval literature, particularly with the image of the Loathly Lady, women are seen "as fickle, as variable, as subject to irrational moods and changes.... In so far as she is still credited with a certain power or sovereignty, she is rejected as evil, unreasonable, or silly." As the concept of "reason" gained strength over this notion of feminine variability, the "sovereignty of reason," associated with the more reasonable male, became the source of power and authority in literature ("Roots of the Symbolic Role," pp. 62–63).

13. Aguirre, "Roots of the Symbolic Role," p. 63.

14. Ellen Caldwell discusses the issue of female ugliness and its relationship to a limited role of power in her article, "Brains or Beauty," included in the present volume. Her argument that the Loathly Lady's hideousness allows her a temporary ingress to the world of masculine authority and negotiation dovetails nicely with my discussion of the threat posed by the Loathly Lady and of why Dame Ragnell presents a different type of threat than the Loathly Ladies of other tales.

15. This has been widely noted, though a quotation from Marina Warner seems appropriate here: "A woman might be the lord of her troubadour, but she remained the vassal of her husband" (*Alone*, p. 139).

16. Barbara Hanawalt writes of the conscious effort by medieval men to keep women in their appropriate place, stating that, "Since [medieval men] regarded women as by their very nature unruly, the best way to control them was to enclose them." Despite this attempt at control, "[f]emale challenges to male spatial domination occurred continually throughout the Middle Ages." See *Of Good and Ill Repute*, p. 83. Hanawalt also discusses how women in religious orders were considered particularly threatening, as they were often self-sufficient and not under any clear male authority.

17. Duby, *Love and Marriage*, pp. 3–4.

18. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 140.

19. See Duby's discussion on the relationship between marriage and religious and social order, *Love and Marriage*, p. 11.

20. Stock, "Hag of Castle Hautdesert," p. 123.

21. Stock, "Hag of Castle Hautdesert," p. 124.

22. Stock, "Hag of Castle Hautdesert," p. 129.

23. Morigain is sometimes linked with the valkries of Norse mythology—female figures who chose who would die on the battlefield. This association is interesting in that the fate of warriors is placed outside the control of male order and given to a monstrous female figure. This monstrous female figure would seem to be associated with the fear of those parts of masculine culture that are beyond society's ability to regulate.

24. This crossing of boundaries is literal as well as metaphoric. Arthur, Florent, and the rapist-knight are all outside ordered society (either hunting, fighting, or traveling) when they commit or are accused of a crime. These accusations point to a metaphoric crossing of boundaries as well, resulting in the need for penance before they can fully rejoin the society and clarification of what it is meant to represent (order, law, civilization).

25. This is a fairly common motif, the so-called "neck riddle," in which a person has to answer a riddle or lose his (or her) life. The most famous neck riddle is probably that of the Sphinx, which Oedipus answered and was therefore given kingship.

26. The Loathly Lady of "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" is found "Betwixt an oke and a greene hollen" (lines 55–56), traditionally a place where magic was to be found. Perhaps this points to the Irish origins of the Loathly Lady that Maynadier discusses in his book on "The Wife of Bath's Tale."

27. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 97. Douglas's notion here is part of the Jungian structure of society in terms of reactions towards social boundaries and marginal figures, as well as of other theories of taboo in culture. See in particular Jung's *Man and His Symbols*; and Hutton Webster, *Taboo: A Sociological Study*, both interesting works on this topic.

28. This point is made particularly clear in "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell" in that Gromer and Dame Ragnell, both marginal figures found in the woods, share the knowledge/power of the riddle. Gromer, a disgruntled knight, uses his knowledge to gain mastery over his king. Dame Ragnell uses this same knowledge to gain mastery over both Arthur and Gawain, but also to usurp her brother's power.

29. It is interesting to note here that the answer to the neck riddle in the Loathly Lady tales is given to the one who must answer the riddle and does not come from any knowledge the victim himself has. This transference of knowledge is another aspect of the Loathly Lady and is perhaps part of the advisory role of the Loathly Lady that S. Elizabeth Passmore discusses in her article "Through the Counsel of a Lady," in the present volume.

30. Since these romances were normally presented to noble audiences, making the threatening figure part of an experience outside of their own ensures her marginal nature. The threat of an increasingly well-to-do peasant class intruding into noble society was no doubt also being manifested in the Loathly Lady.

31. Several works are good references for the details of sumptuary laws and their enactment, the standard still being Frances Elizabeth Baldwin's seminal work *Sumptuary Legislation*. The basis for sumptuary laws in the Middle Ages was to

preserve class distinctions that were being blurred by the rising wealth of the lower classes. As peasants became able to buy clothing that once only the nobility could afford, sumptuary laws sought to control what clothing could, and sometimes should, be worn by what classes. This attempt at regulating the presentation of social identity relates well to the actions of the Loathly Lady in both "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" and "The Tale of Florent" in which the ladies' attempts to present themselves in the garb of nobility while still ugly are unsuccessful. Dame Ragnell's successful intrusion into the noble class while still ugly marks another unique aspect of her character.

32. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 122.

33. Burns discusses the distinction between the innate majesty of Christ and the performed majesty of kings, proposing that earthly kingship had to be made through the public receipt of the proper clothes. In other words, public display of clothing creates status. Thus nobles feared that peasants would think themselves equal to their betters because they could afford "noble" clothes. *Courtly Love Undressed*, pp. 31–32.

34. See Duby, *Love and Marriage*, pp. 3–8.

35. Performance in regard to gender, power, and agency are discussed in many places, but Judith Butler's theories on gender identity seem most appropriate here. Butler states that performance constitutes "the identity it is purported to be.... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.... Without an agent ... there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within society" (*Gender Trouble*, p. 25). While Ragnell's transformation is a gendered performance, as she places herself in the role of a desirable and noble woman, her performance is just as much social. By effecting her own transformation in the social arena before her actual physical transformation, Dame Ragnell assumes agency for her reception and placement within the order of society.

36. Much has been written about this theory. Most of the terminology I use comes from Laura Mulvey's seminal article on "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema."

37. Cummins, *Medieval Art*, p. 5. Cummins places this pageantry within the aristocratic amusement of hunting, which helped to build moral character and prepared knights for war.

38. Cummins, *Medieval Art*, p. 7.

39. In other tales, knights, such as Erec and Lancelot, fought foes unarmed as an indication of their skill, strength, courage, and moral virtue.

40. Dame Ragnell uses this same tactic later with Arthur. An appeal to honor rather than a triumph in combat is a more feminine approach to chivalric authority, and therefore not befitting a king.

41. For more details on the intricacies of chivalric honor and courtesy between knights, see Leon Gautier's definitive book *La Chevalerie*.

42. In "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," the details of why Arthur is given the riddle by the Baron are lost in a missing half page of the manuscript. The lady's claim that

her stepmother made her ugly and “witched my brother into a churlish B[aron]” would imply that the Baron’s actions are dictated by a transformation and not by anything Arthur has done. Arthur demonstrates his worthiness as a king and knight by giving his pledge to the Baron by raising his hand, a sign of chivalric honor and a binding oath. For details on the significance of this as a method of oath-swearing, see Gautier, *Chivalry*, pp. 79–83. The Loathly Lady also says that her father, an old knight, married a young woman, the wicked stepmother who curses the lady and the Baron. The transgression may well be that of the old knight, who, like January in “The Merchant’s Tale,” makes an improper marriage which instigates dishonor. If this is the case, Arthur, like a good medieval king, may be objecting to the sin of a subject, since he (as king) was responsible for the moral as well as the social well-being of his subjects.

43. The function of symbols in any mode of storytelling is contingent on meanings and values portrayed not only in the stories, but also within the community that produced the story. In distinguishing between the nature of sign and symbol, Julia Kristeva asserts that the meanings of symbols are less arbitrary than the meanings of signs. Once a sign “is more or less free from its dependence on the ‘universal’ (the concept, the idea in itself), it becomes a potential mutation, a constant transformation which, despite being tied to one signified, is capable of many regenerations. The ideologeme of the sign can therefore suggest what is not, but *will be*, or rather *can be*.” (*Reader*, p. 71).

44. In “The Marriage of Sir Gawain,” missing leaves make an exact analysis of social concerns difficult, but there does seem to be an emphasis on the inability of Kay to accept the ugly woman as Gawain’s wife, even after Gawain and Arthur have consented to the marriage. Here, Kay is the one who rushes to Gawain’s room when he does not appear the next day, and the triumph of the tale is Kay and Gawain’s presentation of the now beautiful wife to Arthur and Guinevere. The social disruption would seem to be between the knights, and the lady serves to reunite the masculine fellowship of knighthood rather than to point out any significant flaw in it.

45. According to medieval medical beliefs, having too much sex would disrupt the balance of a man’s humors and therefore make him weak and less manly. It might even be possible for the man to become seriously ill. Gawain’s later refusal to take part in knightly activities attests to the weakness he sustains from too much sexual activity with his wife. For a detailed discussion on medieval perceptions of humors and health, see Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex*, particularly Chapters 1 and 2.

46. Duby discusses masculine concerns about feminine sexuality and ways men tried to regulate female sexuality through marriage (*Love and Marriage*, pp. 7–13).

47. Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, p. 151.

48. Gawain undoubtedly believes that his wife is a magical creature of some sort, or perhaps even an evil spirit. He never expresses this fear while she is ugly, even though she is found in the woods and knows the answer to the riddle.

49. Regina Barreca puts curses such as this one in the realm of the feminine: “The

skillful and effective curse is a power belonging to the vanquished, not the victor. In part this power depends on the subterfuge of the vanquished, the camouflage offered by perceived insignificance.... These figures are able to catalyze the liminality of their inscription within the larger social order to draw upon forces and mechanisms outside the orthodox belief systems" ("Writing as Voodoo," p. 177). The stepmother who curses Dame Ragnell has no presence or motives within the tale. Yet although no man ever has control over Dame Ragnell's body, even after marriage, the only one who ever overpowers her, or "defiles" her, is the phantom stepmother. As Ragnell gains control over Gawain and Arthur, it appears that the stepmother has given her an inroad to power rather than the terrible punishment the curse was presumably meant to be.

50. In *Erec and Enide*, this obligation is shown in its extreme form with the knight in the garden. After being defeated by Erec, the knight tells Ercc he only fought because his lady made him promise never to leave the garden until someone defeated him. The knight admits to Erec that he should not have made the oath, but declares that it was right that he fulfilled it. In this incident, breaking an oath to a lady was more dishonorable than keeping a bad oath. Again, Gautier's book *Chivalry* covers this topic quite thoroughly.

51. Brown, "Dark Age Crisis," p. 15.

52. The trope of the absent female as the ideal in romance literature has been widely discussed. For a discussion of how the absent female ties into the goals of the troubadour as lover and the structure of Augustinian rhetoric, see Spence, *Rhetoric of Reason*, pp. 111–15.

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