

It's a Boy-Girl Thing: Sovereignty in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

The poem *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (*WSG*) is a tale that tells us that what women desire most is “sovereignty” (l. 423) – the ability to make your own decisions. Several critics, like Collen Donnelly and Rebecca Davis, consider the poem a parody, in which King Arthur and courtly behaviour are being mocked. By using humour, the poet of *WSG* supposedly reveals the aristocratic preoccupation with insignificant “rituals and behaviours,” and questions aristocratic customs by “parodying aspects of chivalric code and courtly etiquette” (Donnelly 343, 322). These comical “elements” that the poet has woven into the tale were “familiar to the poet’s target audience and likely to elicit laughter from those who recognize the allusions” (Davis 431). However, despite the comical aspects of the tale, and the numerous arguments in favour of a ‘parody reading’, I would like to argue that *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (*WSG*) is not a parody, but exactly what it appears to be at first sight: a tale about the importance of female sovereignty. The evidence put forward by critics supporting the ‘parody reading’ – the description of the ‘loathly lady’ and the ‘unknightly behaviour’ – can just as well support the arguments in favour of a ‘female sovereignty’ reading.

According to Davis, the repetition of descriptions of Dame Ragnelle’s loathly attributes, her wishing to “be weddyd alle openly” (l. 575), and her disturbing conduct at the wedding dinner as she “ete as moche as six that ther wore” (l. 605) are “absurd” and a sign of the narrator getting “carried away with silliness” in order to “generate more laughs” (433). In Donnelly’s view, the scenes on Ragnelle’s appearance and behaviour are “a satiric attack on aristocratic pretentiousness” (Donnelly 331). However, what Davis and Donnelly conveniently leave out, is that we learn that Dame Ragnelle’s foul appearance has been brought about by a spell. Even from the onset, it is clear that Ragnelle is not just a homely creature living on the borders of civilisation. After all, she calls herself “a lady,” and during her first meeting with Arthur “She satt on a palfray was gay begon, / With gold besett and many a precious stone” (ll. 46-47). Secondly,

on the day of her wedding she “was arrayd in the richest maner” (l. 590) and her clothes were said to be “worthe thre thowsand mark” (l. 592). As Mary Leech points out, the combination of a “richly arrayed horse” and expensive clothing suggest a “noble station” (219). I would like to think that an audience in the Middle Ages would recognize these elements, and would suspect Dame Ragnelle to be more than she appears to be. Therefore, the over-exaggeration of Ragnelle’s characteristics and behaviour could, as Witherington suggests, easily be attributed to “enthusiasm on the part of a scribe” (qtd. in Davis 433), and is there, not for comic relief, but to add extra weight to the ‘sacrifice’ the potential husband, Gawain, is making – an illustration of his noble behaviour, and a foreshadowing of what is to come.

Noble behaviour was associated with, and attributed to, courtly figures. According to both Donnelly and Davis the aristocratic customs, or knightly behaviour, are being parodied in *WSG*. Donnelly argues that Arthur’s actions and questionable use of oaths illustrate the parodying of aristocratic abuse of power (330), and Davis suggests that, since the audience knows what is at stake and has, as opposed to Gawain, seen the “loathly lady” Ragnelle, “laughter ensues from dramatic irony when the audience comprehends the truth” behind Arthur’s behaviour (436). What both Donnelly and Davis ignore is the fact that Arthur does not give his word to Dame Ragnelle, until after he has asked for Gawain’s approval. Secondly, Arthur seems truly conflicted by having to ask Gawain this tremendous favour, as can be inferred from his words: “Wherfor I am wo begon - / Thus in my hartt I make my mone” (ll. 340-41), and later followed by the narrator’s voice: “The Kyng of her had greatt shame” (l. 515) and “he were grevyd” (l. 516). Arthur is not abusing his aristocratic privileges, but is actually behaving nobly; he realizes he cannot make the important decision of marriage without Gawain’s acceptance. The importance of the scene lies in Gawain’s response, when he answers as a loyal knight would with “Ys this alle?” (l. 342) and “I shalle wed her and wed her agayn, / Thowghe she were a fend (ll. 343-44) or “elles were nott I your frende” (l. 347). Gawain “affirms the worth

of Arthur's court through his loyalty" (Peck 123) – another illustration of noble and knightly behaviour.

Noble knights in Arthurian legends usually show their abilities and honourable qualities by facing challenging quests. Critics have mentioned that the fact that such a quest is absent in *WSG* is an illustration of the poet's mockery. In Davis's view, the fact that Gawain's actions in *WSG* solely entail "writing in a book" and marrying "a loathly hag," are reasons to believe that he is the "target of the poet's irreverent humour" (436). However, knightly behaviour was considered to entail more than the ability to physically fight off foes, or display extraordinary mental capacities. Knightly behaviour was also about keeping one's word, doing the right thing and 'gentillesse'. So, when Gawain says, "I wolle do more / Then for to kysse, and God before" (ll. 638-39), he tells Ragnelle that he "will perform his conjugal duty without complaint [...] and without her demanding it"; he is showing his attitude toward oaths, and is demonstrating his "gentility" (Donnelly 332). Sir Gawain's challenge in *WSG* is no less mentally or physically demanding than any other, perhaps more obvious, knightly assignment. Nor does it demand less noble behaviour. This quest is not a sign of mockery, but shows that knightly behaviour encompasses 'gentillesse' and can come only from truly virtuous acts committed by virtuous people.

The quality of 'gentillesse' can be associated with self-sacrifice, compassion and compromise. It has been argued that Gawain's wavering answer to Ragnelle's question, whether he wishes her fair during the day and foul at night, or foul during daytime and beautiful at night time, is also a humorous attempt of the poet to parody "unreconstructed male desire" – "fair" being "shorthand for desirable sex object" and "foul" as being a "threat to the male ego" and "ruinous to a man's reputation" (Bugge 205). However, the importance of this scene lies not in Ragnelle's question, but in Gawain's answer when he tells her:

Evyne as ye wolle, I putt itt in your hand.

Lose me when ye lyst, for I am bond;

I putt the choyse in you.  
 Bothe body and goodes, hartt, and every dele,  
 Ys alle your oun, for to by and selle -  
 That make I God avowe! (ll. 679-84)

Gawain puts Ragnelle's fate into her own hands and, by doing so, gives her sovereignty – which is what all women desire most. As John Bugge explains, it is Gawain's voluntary and sensible granting of sovereignty that leads to the breaking of the spell and Ragnelle's change; a change “resulting not from magic, but from an action by her male partner” (206). The question posed by Ragnelle is not there for the purpose of humour, but to illustrate that giving sovereignty to the woman will not only result in the empowering of the woman, but will also lead to a positive outcome for all parties involved.

The empowerment of women is not the most common of subjects for tales in the Middle Ages. Some critics, therefore, have argued that the fact that Ragnelle would expect sovereignty from the male protagonist, is ridiculous. According to the times, she would not have any rights to it, and so, to both the medieval poet and his audience, such a claim would have been “downright preposterous” and “unreasonable” (Bugge 199). For sure, marriage in the Middle Ages was more often used to restrict and control women – “particularly within the context of a romance” (Leech 216) – than to liberate them. However, as Leech continues, in *WSG*, Ragnelle does indeed influence the men in her life, even after she is married and is no longer homely looking (225). Moreover, when Ragnelle says to Gawain that she will be “obysaunt” (l. 784) and “neuere withe [him] to debate” (l. 786), it is, according to Bugge, not a vow of submission, but a promise of understanding, a sign of “marital harmony and mutual respect” (211). After all, gaining sovereignty is just as difficult a matter as granting it, and the entire endeavour demands a certain amount of compromise. Demanding too much too soon usually does not benefit the cause; women of all times know that. Elizabeth Biebel-Stanley suggests in her analysis of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, that “the events of the romance reveal, women can improve society” and “a

marriage of mutual love [...] can be read as a claim for increased power for medieval queens” to “bring about change in her society” (79). In this perspective, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* could as well represent a longed after change in society – written within the confinements of its days and completely in accordance with the spirit of its time.

#### Works Cited

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