

English 240

Jessie Dixon

3/17/06

“Nether in bowre ne in halle:”

Reconciling Public and Private in “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle”

“The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle” is a tale bound together by oaths, much like the society it depicts and the societal ideal of its intended audience. Structuring the narrative are the tacit vows of the poet to conform to the rules of the genre and tale-type his audience expects, (and, perhaps, to even a more explicit request for a performance of a specific, already familiar story from a commissioning lord) and the audience’s willingness to overlook poetic licenses and lapses and ambiguities in the tale in return, and the various private and public oaths of the characters which drive the plot. Scholars have noted that “In medieval romance as in medieval society, the essence of the law was the vow [...] and the foundation of civilization was considered to be the compacts, spoken or tacit, made between men” (Ramsey 82). These “spoken [and] tacit” “compacts” respectively reflect the public and private spheres and obligations of medieval court life. Arthur and Gawain are challenged by the demands of both types of oaths in this romance, and both types carry grave repercussions for the King and his court if they are not properly fulfilled. “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle” explores the relationship and interaction between what is public and private in an ideal medieval court and the dangers inherent in incorrectly distinguishing the two.

Joep Leerssen, quoting Jacques Le Goff, writes that “In the Middle Ages the great contrast was [...] between nature and culture, expressed in terms of the ‘opposition between what was built, cultivated, and inhabited [...] and what was essentially wild, [...] that is, between men

who lived in groups and those who lived in solitude” (25). This divide is certainly pervasive in “The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle.” The public, group forces of Arthur and his court are set against the solitary inhabitants of Inglewood Forest, Sir Gromer Somer Joure and his sister Dame Ragnelle. Their associations with the forest world mark them as outsiders to Arthur’s ordered, civilized court as much as their behavior and the whiff of magic that surrounds them does. Sir Gromer and Dame Ragnelle seem devoid of a place of origin, whether because they are truly fairy creatures or because they have simply been exiled from their native home.

Although Sir Gromer accuses the king of appropriating his lands for a gift to Sir Gawain, he never identifies these territories by name, a striking omission considering that the location of Arthur’s court and the forest itself are explicitly noted (ln16, 132). The siblings are found only in the forest, and they do not appear to even have each other’s company in that wilderness. Arthur himself must be alone to meet either of them within the privacy of Inglewood. This spatial solitude reflects medieval conceptions of the divide Leerssen sees between wildness and civility: the natural world, separated from the highly public, cultured circle of court life, is a dangerously private force, threatening to overwhelm any single human, no matter how powerful, who might find himself alone there with powers that cannot be controlled by the chivalrous code of the court (27). Only outlaws and magical beings reside beyond the reach of society. Ramsey explains that “chivalric virtues are those that ensure just and stable rule, the defense of the existing order, and the observance of social form and rank – the virtues of civilization” (4). Society is a public construction, assuring the weal of the many by putting communal restrictions upon even the private aspects of life such as “the ingestion and digestion of food and [...] sexuality and procreation” (Leerssen 26). The chivalric codes of medieval courts were highly formalized, ritualized attempts to control such behaviors. They regulated what might be

conducted in public and what must remain private, and imposed elaborate ceremony in order to distinguish the courts from the wilderness surrounding them. Leerssen explains that “table manners and courtly behavior [...], protocol and an elaborate hierarchical system of titles and artificial dignities,” as well as the “wholly desexualized, disembodied devotion” of courtly love are all public manifestations of this impulse (27).

Sir Gromer and his sister lead direct assaults upon the sense of order and civilization Arthur’s court tries to provide by contravening its traditions. Sir Gromer, in full armor, confronts the relatively unprotected King, and hardly accords him the respect due to his feudal lord, violating rules of combat and rank (lms 49-120). Ragnelle demands to marry Gawain, which would certainly have been considered presumptuous behavior from a woman, especially among the nobility (here Ragnelle explicitly connects herself with the wilderness, rather than the court, pointing out that “Choyse for a make hathe an owlle”) (ln 310). Her presumptuousness would indicate to the audience her unfamiliarity with the conventions of courtly love, for no woman as hideous as she could possibly hope to be the mate of such an exalted knight as Gawain. Even the narrator expresses his disgust that “so fowlle a creature withoute mesure” should “ryde so gayly” on a beautiful palfrey (lms 249-50). Showing her family’s disregard for the strict rules of precedence, Ragnelle rides past the king upon entering the castle courtyard (lms 518-9). Her table manners are considered deplorable, and the poet devotes some time to noting how her appearance and behavior offend all around her (lms 590, 600-21). The denizens of Inglewood operate independently of the rules of court, positioning themselves as outsiders, agents of wilderness and solitude.

The binary Leerssen establishes between wilderness and civilization may be extended within the world of this text:

Wilderness/nature	vs.	Civilization
Forest/outlaw		Court/law
Independence		Obedience
Solitude		Society
Private		Public

(The confrontations between overt magic and Christianity are largely suppressed in this text, but one could imagine them also participating in the binary in another version of the tale, functioning at the level of forest/outlaw versus court/law.) The conflicts of the tale are driven by this divide. The characters make most of their vows in private, yet they fear the repercussions of breaking those oaths. As Arthur swore in secret to return with the answer to Sir Gromer's riddle, he would not have been disgraced before his knights if he failed to uphold his bargain. Additionally, the vow is made outside of the court, the limits of civilization and law. Arthur, as king, would be safe from Sir Gromer's death threat even if Sir Gromer had to seek him out by coming to the court. Gawain's vow to marry Ragnelle is equally private. Within the romance tradition, heroes are set apart "by the scrupulousness with which they obey rules even in the most compromised of circumstances" (Ramsey 84). Both Arthur and Gawain hold themselves to public, courtly standards, even when dealing privately with those who are outside of the courts laws and customs. Arthur and Gawain see no difference between public and private behavior, although the rest of the court does not always properly integrate the two, as demonstrated by the women's disapproval of Ragnelle's insistence on a public wedding (570-1). Ragnelle follows the Church's preferred procedure by marrying openly, ensuring that the legality of her marriage can never be challenged. The public ceremony and feast which follows simultaneously tests the limits of her new husband's courtesy.

Ragnelle serves as the linking force in the tale. Her early behavior marks her as an outsider to Arthur's court and its laws, but she ultimately mediates between public and private values. The choice she offers Gawain is public or private happiness. Gawain feels that he is faced with an impossible decision: to have his wife beautiful during the day means the frightening prospect of retiring each night with a hag, but to have her young and beautiful in private means a loss of "worshypp," a fate greatly feared in a medieval court (672). Ragnelle specifically warns Gawain that he should consider his worship when making his decision (665-6). When he refuses to make such a choice and allows Ragnelle her "sovereynthe," she is able to grant him both public and private happiness, bringing about the expected romance resolution.

As "the appeal of the romance is [...] to those who seek to find a stable position within the society," the tale's audience would expect and require Arthur's courtiers to overcome whatever divisive or subversive forces with which they are faced in order to stand as the exemplum of a proper noble court (Ramsey 4). Thus it is important that "the ideal of the consensual marriage and the necessity of its public revelation are reinscribed by the ending," upholding the ideals of both the romance and chivalric traditions (Perry 143). In their respective roles as superlative knight of the court and solitary forest-dweller, Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle are the union of public and private in the tale. In the world of a noble medieval court, there is little distinction between public and private life. Given the relatively close quarters and the concepts of "the king's two bodies," political and individual, which might be extended to his magnates within their own feudal territories, even the most private actions often resulted in serious public consequences. Reputation and 'worship' were seen as directly tied to political power, and only those highly favored by the king could expect to increase their holdings through gifts, as Gawain did, or through bribes from lesser nobles who hoped to trade upon their

superiors' influence with the king for advancement. Marriages were contracted to increase political prestige and financial resources. If the Church emphasized the importance of love and individual choice in marriage, the nobility had more pragmatic concerns, which nearly always overrode any consideration of emotion, although disharmony resulting from strategic alliances could have serious dynastic consequences. Ragnelle's point is that both their private marital relationship and the public image they project are equally important and inextricably linked.

Arthur and Gawain's heroism in the tale comes from their successful integration of their public court duties and their private oaths. They treat each as binding upon their honor. Sir Gromer Somer Joure and Dame Ragnelle act as outsiders by attempting to impose the values of their solitary exile in Inglewood upon the king's civilized court. As a representative of a completely private world, Ragnelle's adoption of court values and her highly-developed social consciousness means that she shows the resolution of the tale's private and public tensions. Her union with Gawain is a union of the opposing forces, balancing the demands of a courtier's personal and social identities. The dangers of failing to adequately negotiate this balance would be very familiar to the tale's audience; even though the consequences of the king losing his head for failing to answer a riddle or the chief knight having to make a choice between having his wife as a gracious consort in the castle hall or a palatable lover in his private chamber are far outside of the actual courtier's experience, all would recognize the need to reconcile their responsibilities and freedoms. "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle" reaffirms what any competent medieval courtier would have learned from birth: successful maintenance of their highly public position in their society was entirely dependent upon their identification of public and private obligations and correctly separating and integrating their vows and actions in both bower and hall.

Works Cited

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7/15/07.