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Loathliness, loyalty, and location : the threat of the Other in Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle

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Loathliness, Loyalty, and Location: the threat of the Other
in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

by

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Abstract

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle is a medieval text that explores issues of gender, power, and space. In this essay, I demonstrate how the text establishes Dame Ragnelle as both a physical and geographic Other, while, paradoxically, revealing the outsider as both other and familiar. Ragnelle's entrance into the court challenges the sovereignty of King Arthur and the pleasures of the courtiers; I argue that her presence is actually a catalyst that starts the revelation of underlying tensions and insecurities in the court. Furthermore, I argue that the "othering" and disruption in this text stem not from Ragnelle's gender, but rather from her position as a foreigner— an outsider— to the court. She is an stranger from an "outside" location who threatens the "inside" order and establishment of the court. I maintain that the Northern author of this text uses Dame Ragnelle to explore issues of regional and national identity, and that her bodily othering is a manifestation of medieval anxieties about community, nation, and power. Dame Ragnelle's character works to debunk regional stereotypes through her transformation, thus challenging the stability of the label of "Other." My reading of this tale posits it as a demand for respect and fairness for all citizens, even those geographically and culturally removed from the court.

One of the appealing aspects of King Arthur's court is the order and allegiances that supposedly exists among its members. Knights share tight bonds of brotherhood, maids are fair and graceful, and all are loyal to the brave and powerful Arthur. On the surface, all is joyous and well. However, many medieval Arthurian tales shed a great deal of doubt on this image of harmony and happiness. In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the peaceful image of utopian existence is seriously shaken by the introduction and incorporation of "the Other." The hideous Dame Ragnelle not only threatens to ruin the court's refined sensibilities, she also throws into question the power relations that exist between Arthur and his knights. What is it about Dame Ragnelle that is so disruptive and unsettling? Certainly, she is not the first character in medieval literature to cast a shadow of doubt on the harmonious image of the court. Although there is little scholarly work on this particular tale, the themes of sovereignty, power, and disruption, which are so important in this text, have been widely discussed by critics of medieval literature. In particular, versions of the "loathly lady" tale have been read as challenges to the male-dominated gender hierarchies within medieval culture. Gender is certainly an issue central to the structure of the court and the activities of those who reside within it. Indeed, it is very tempting to see Ragnelle's otherness as a product of her female gender in a masculine society and to attribute the tension she brings to Arthur's court to her disruption of traditional male-female roles. Yet by interpreting this story only through the lens of gender, we miss an important tension-causing theme; as a northern romance¹, the tale concerns itself with issues of territory and identity. To fully understand the threat Dame Ragnelle poses to the court and to Arthur, we must consider issues of regionalism and territorial control. Of course, the driving trope of the tale—the

¹ Thomas Hahn bases the tale's classification as a northern text on the allusions to Inglewood Forest and a Carlisle court. He uses these allusions to link *Wedding* with other regional texts, such as *The Avowing of Arthur* and *The Awntyrs of Arthur*. In addition, though none of the surviving copies record the dialect of the author, Hahn cites "linguistic evidence" as further proof of the poems' northern origin. (Hahn 29-44)

question of what women most desire— admittedly begs examination of gender; however, it must be remembered that the question is only asked to provide a punishment for an land-hungry ruler.

Recent work on late medieval Arthurian romance has opened consideration of the importance of territory to medieval authors. Questions of space—of who belonged where and who had control of a particular region— had to be confronted by medieval authors who were balancing their regional and their national identity. While authors were vested in portraying a unified England loyal to a respected sovereign, they also wanted to maintain the integrity of their regional identity. In *Sovereign Fantasies*, a comprehensive work that explores themes of sovereignty, space, and identity, Patricia Ingham discusses how

Arthurian romance offers a late medieval audience ... imaginative access to the affections and disaffections of community; it provides a place to explore the delights and horrors of group identity, of uniting and dividing, of the violence and pleasure of incorporation and accommodation. (Ingham 156)

Ingham situates her readings of various Arthurian tales in a study of “the efforts of the English crown to elaborate its power over its ‘internal colonies,’” such as Wales and Scotland (Ingham 171). Even more relevant to this discussion, though, is her examination of the challenges the crown faced as it attempted to join the northern and southern regions of Britain into a single realm . Although she does not discuss *The Wedding of Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, Ingham does examine two other northern romances² that illustrate regional tensions— *The Avowing of King Arthur* and *Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terme Wathelyn*. Ingham convincingly argues that such texts illustrate the anxieties that arise from unification, and that rather than deal with these anxieties directly, the texts channel such cultural tensions through issues of gender.

² *Avowing* is dated in the late fourteenth to the mid fifteenth century, *Awntyrs* from the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The only surviving manuscript of *The Wedding* is dated in the sixteenth century. (Hahn)

One could certainly use the same approach in understanding Dame Ragnelle and her impact on Arthur. As in the works that Ingham discusses, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* seems to guide our initial reading to an examination of gender. However, I would argue that the “othering” and disruption in this text stem not from Ragnelle’s gender, but rather from her position as a foreigner— an outsider— to the court. She is an stranger from an “outside” location who threatens the “inside” order and establishment of the court. I will argue that the northern author of this text uses Dame Ragnelle to explore issues of regional and national identity.

Before turning to a discussion of regionalism and the implications of annexation and incorporation, I first examine how the text establishes otherness, paradoxically revealing the outsider as both other and familiar. I then explore how Dame Ragnelle, as Other, affects the court and reveals its internal problems. Finally, I will examine what the text tries to accomplish through this portrayal of Ragnelle and the court. First, it reveals a mixture of fascination and critique of the court; this ambivalence, which we can attribute to both the author and the audience he writes for, results from being geographically removed from the central court, but still politically and legally linked to its sovereignty. Secondly, the text warns against the dismissal of Other as inferior, perhaps issuing a regional call for respect and fairness.

The text first introduces the Other through the figure of Sir Gromer Somer Joure, whom Arthur meets deep in Inglewood Forest after having left the rest of his hunting party to pursue a deer. Although the tale primarily focuses on Dame Ragnelle’s otherness, the scene between Sir Gromer and Arthur serves as an insightful introduction to many of the issues central to the text. First, Sir Gromer illustrates how the Other can be simultaneously strange and familiar. His home is geographically remote from the court,

and this physical distance from courtly society makes him a “quaynt grome” (strange man) to Arthur. As a stranger, he is clearly Other. But at the same time, like the loyal associates who populate Arthur’s court, Sir Gromer is “armyd welle and sure,/ a knyght fulle strong and of greatt myght” (52). Knighthood links this stranger quite intimately with the court; in this way he is essentially one of them. Arthur recognizes the commonality and tries to appeal to it:

“A, Sir Gromer Somer, bethynk the welle;
To sle me here honour getyst thou no delle.
Bethynk the thou art a knyght:
Yf thou sle me nowe in thys case,
Alle knyghts wolle refuse the in every place;
That shame shalle nevere the froo.” (64-69)

It is a bit ironic that Arthur threatens Sir Gromer with exclusion from knightly society, considering he is already an outsider to the court, but Arthur hopes that the sensibilities that his courtly knights possess will also influence Sir Gromer. By attributing qualities such as honor and brotherhood to a strange knight, Arthur indicates that he views him as a familiar in terms of background and beliefs. This familiarity undercuts the stability of the category of “Other,” for if Gromer can be simultaneously a stranger and a brother, how can he be clearly labeled as “Other”? Here the text begins to illustrate that the Other may actually be quite similar to those who view him as different.

Sir Gromer’s response to the King’s appeal raises a second issue that is central to the text– the issue of sovereignty. As King, Arthur requires obedience and respect from his knights, but this stranger has none of the expected reverence. Sir Gromer is angry at Arthur for taking his land, and he intends to make the king answer for his actions:

“Well imet, Kyng Arthour!
Thou hast me done wrong many a yere
And wofully I shall uytte the here;
I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done.

Thou hast gevyn my landes in certayn
With greatt wrong unto Sir Gawen.
Whate sayest thou, Kyng alone?" (54-60)

The strange knight completely disregards Arthur's authority. In fact, Sir Gromer remains in control of the situation and sets the conditions that the King must satisfy in order to live; Arthur must learn what it is that women most want and report back within the allotted time or face death at the hands of Sir Gromer. This power-reversal illustrates the threat that the Other poses to Arthur's sovereignty— an issue that the text will further explore through the character of Dame Ragnelle.

While trying to fulfill the mission that Sir Gromer Somer Joure has given him, Arthur meets Dame Ragnelle, who the text clearly establishes as Other. Like her brother, she is physically located in Inglewood forest, far from the court. However, the trait that most obviously distinguishes her as Other is not her geographic difference but her physical loathliness:

She was as ungoodly a creature
As evere man sawe, withoute mesure.
Kyng Arthure mervaylyd securly.
Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle,
Her mowithe wyde, her teth yalowe overe alle,
With bleryd eyen greater then a balle. (228-234).

The description continues, covering Ragnelle's ugliness as thoroughly as possible, even though "no tung may telle" the full account of her hideousness (244). Actually, well over twenty-five lines of the tale are devoted to an in-depth description of her repulsive appearance. Her wrinkles, tusks, and tangled gray hair contrast sharply with the renowned beauty of Guinevere and the other fair ladies of the court, marking her clearly as Other.

Part of the significance of Ragnelle's appearance may be related to the literary

tradition of the loathly lady. Sigmund Eisner traces the tradition to its probable roots in Ireland. Although the tales changed greatly over time, it seems that the theme of an ugly woman being transformed upon her marriage is a constant in many of the stories. More importantly, the lady typically possesses the power to make her new husband King of the country (Eisner 35). Obviously, this is not explicitly the case in Ragnelle's story, but she does carry on the traditional concern with sovereignty and who gets to have it.

In return for the answer to Sir Gromer's question of what women desire, Ragnelle is promised she can marry Sir Gawain; however, the members of the court are reluctant to accept their new sister. When Dame Ragnelle enters the royal community, her differences begin to cause serious disruptions and discomforts. Arthur grieves that he must introduce such a being into his court, and he is so repulsed that he does not even want to ride with her on the journey to bring her to her new home: "The King of her had greatt shame,/ Butt forth she rood, thoughe he were grevyd" (515-516). Guinevere tries to persuade Ragnelle to have a private wedding ceremony to reduce Gawain's humiliation, but Ragnelle refuses. No where is her uncourtly behavior more evident than at the wedding feast: "When the servyce cam her before,/ She ete as moche as six that ther wore;/ That mervaylyd many a man./ Her nayles were long ynchys thre,/ Therwith she breke her mete ungoodly;/ Therefore she ete alone" (604-609). She clearly lacks the manners and graces that define the court. She seems to revel in her ugliness and to enjoy flaunting it to make others uncomfortable. But the question is, why does Ragnelle seem so intent on disrupting the customs of the court? And why does the court find her so repulsive and upsetting? Is it just her loathly appearance that offends them, or does she represent some other threat to them?

In his essay "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," Slavoj Zizek discusses

the tensions that often arise between a community and an “encroaching” outsider. His ideas can provide us with some insights as to why the court finds Ragnelle so offensive. It is not just that her “fowlle and horyble” physical appearance makes their stomachs turn; the courtiers’ rejection of Ragnelle is based on their perception of the threat she poses to their way of life, to what Zizek, following Jacques Lacan, might call their “Thing.” Zizek explains that “A nation exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in certain social practices” (Zizek 38). Transferring this to community life at court, this means the court’s identity, their importance, and their place in society all depend on the rules and practices that shape their enjoyments. Chivalry, grace, and beauty are not just qualities to be attained, they are a set of enjoyments that define the court’s unique identity. Ragnelle rejects these ideals and social practices, yet still retains her own power and pleasure. The Court, shaken by her dismissal of the way they organize enjoyment and by the introduction of an alternative (and very foreign) form of desire, thus fears, as Zizek puts it, the “theft of their enjoyment” by an outsider.

Yet Dame Ragnelle’s presence does more than endanger the court’s pleasure by threatening to steal it or pollute it. On another level, she serves to reveal the tensions, antagonisms, and guilts that lurk beneath the shiny exterior of the royal society. Although, as the outsider, Ragnelle appears to be the source of tension, she is actually just the form upon which the court can project their preexisting anger and discomfort. If, as Zizek claims, “the hatred of the other is the hatred of our own excess of enjoyment,” (42) we can conclude that the court members find Ragnelle so repulsive because she reflects elements of their own excessive life style. In many Arthurian romances, the sumptuous feasts, elaborate clothing, and lavish decorations are described in rich detail. In this tale, all of this excess is channeled through Ragnelle, where it becomes a matter of

repulsion rather than a mark of prosperity or royalty. Although the courtiers do not want to acknowledge it, they actually share some commonalities with this repulsively excessive Other. Ragnelle's blatant display of excess evokes feelings of suppressed guilt, thereby making her presence even more uncomfortable.

Dame Ragnelle's otherness poses a very obvious threat to the standards of beauty and behavior that the court values. Ugly and unmannerly, she tarnishes the atmosphere with her very presence. However, it is her irreverence for the power structures of the court that make her a truly fascinating and potentially menacing character. She refuses the advice of the Queen and the orders of the King, demanding instead that things be done her way: "So ye wol be rulyd by my councelle,/ Your wille then shalle ye have," (504-505) says Arthur, assuming his usual role as leader. But Ragnelle will not comply: "Nay, Sir Kyng, nowe wolle I nott soo," (506) she replies, then proceeds to tell him how things will be done—triumphant entry and public wedding included. Arthur has no choice but to agree; he owes Ragnelle his life, as she boldly reminds him: "Bethynk you howe I have savyd your lyf./ Therfor with me nowe shalle ye nott stryfe,/ For and ye do, ye be to blame" (512-514). Thus, he must comply as she "steals" his role as master of ceremony; Arthur loses his voice and his power to Ragnelle. In addition, she adds an ominous threat—Arthur will "be to blame" if he does not cooperate with her demands. Arthur must wonder what negative repercussions she has in mind, but rather than risk finding out, he resigns his control. Ragnelle poses a threat to his authority in a way no lady or knight would dare to do, which establishes her both as clearly Other and as clearly disruptive.

The story of Dame Ragnelle offers a fascinating twist on this concept of the threat of otherness. Certainly Ragnelle causes a great deal of worry and discomfort when she

appears in her loathly form, but ironically, it is after her “incorporation” into the court that she becomes a real threat. In the tradition of the loathly lady motif, she is transformed into a beautiful and gracious lady. On her wedding night, Ragnelle offers Gawain a choice: he can have her beautiful by day and ugly by night, or ugly during the day and beautiful at night. Because he really cannot decide which option to choose, Gawain allows Ragnelle to decide. As a reward for his deference, Ragnelle become permanently beautiful. In fact, Guinevere herself calls Ragnelle “the fayrest now in this halle” (794), and her beauty is matched by her grace and wit. Physically, then, she has been incorporated into the court by both her marriage to Arthur’s nephew and by her changed appearance. It might seem that in her new form she would cause no further disruptions to the court. Actually, she is more of a threat after her transformation and marriage.

The disruptions to the court and to Arthur’s authority increase the morning after the wedding. Arthur notices Gawain’s absence, so, saying he is afraid that Ragnelle might have killed Gawain, he goes to check on them at noon. “‘Aryse,’ said the Kyng to Sir Gawen;/ ‘Why slepyst thou so long in bed?’” (731-732) Gawain, who has enjoyed the night with his new bride, does not give the typical warm response to his lord, but instead seems annoyed with Arthur’s interruption: “‘Mary,’ quod Gawen, ‘Sir Kyng, sicurly,/ I wold be glad, and ye would lett me be,/ For I am fulle well att ese’” (733-735). This curt reply comes from the same Gawain who had earlier sworn he would give his life for the King, proclaiming vehemently how much he loved and honored his friend, yet in this response we see quite a change in his attitude. Gawain’s rather abrupt dismissal of Arthur shows that the structure and relations of the court have already changed, and Arthur must keenly feel this shifting of allegiances. Arthur used to occupy the chief place

in his nephew's affections; now he has been replaced by Dame Ragnelle. Gawain no longer depends on the King or the court for his happiness, and eventually he even stops participating in his knightly hobbies:

Gawen loved that Lady, Dame Ragnelle;
In all his lyfe lovyd none so welle,
I tell you withoute lesyng.
As a coward he lay by her bothe day and nyght.
Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte;
Theratt mervaylyd Arthoure the Kyng. (805-810)

By distracting Gawain from his traditional activities, Dame Ragnelle moves from being just a threat to the court to being an actual disruption, much to the dismay of Arthur.

What makes this disruption so fascinating is that Dame Ragnelle is no longer distinctly Other, for she has been entirely integrated into the court's structures. She appears familiar and no longer threatening, but in fact she remains Other in that she does not accept the customs and power structures of the court. She claims (or at least willingly receives) Gawain's time and attentions, depriving Arthur of his most-favored status. In addition, she holds a sort of sovereignty over Arthur since he owes his life to her, and over all of the courtiers in general because she has prevented the loss of their King. Guinevere tells her, "My love, Lady, ye shalle have evere/ For that ye savyd my Lord Arthoure,/ As I am a gentilwoman" (796-798). So, while Ragnelle has become part of the court, she still retains her "otherness" due to her unusual position of power.

What is most interesting, though, is Gawain's emphasis on the status of his new wife. He seems almost eager to remind Arthur what he owes to her:

"Lo, this is my repayre!
Lo!" say Gawen Arthoure untill—
"Syr, this is my wyfe, Dame Ragnelle,
That savyd onys your lyfe."(744-747)

Perhaps this statement is Gawain's way of chiding Arthur for interrupting his happy morning. But when we remember the brusque nature of Gawain's first response to Arthur's intrusion, we can perhaps glimpse some of the latent tensions of the court surfacing through this exchange. Dame Ragnelle provides the catalyst for disruption, and Gawain quickly takes advantage of the situation to express his frustration with Arthur's obsession with control. He seems almost to enjoy seeing Arthur's lose his position of power, as he quickly reminds the King that he owes his life (and therefore the continuation of his power) to Ragnelle. In addition, Gawain knows that he also shares the credit for saving the King's life because he agreed to marry Dame Ragnelle. Seeing Arthur in this double debt makes Gawain bold enough to voice his discontent and shirk the expectations of the King.

The threat that Ragnelle poses in her transformed state is not as widely felt as the threat her loathly form presented to the sensibilities and enjoyments of the court; primarily it is Arthur who is discomfited by Ragnelle's new role. Again, Zizek's work can help us understand Arthur's worry. Zizek explains that "the Thing exists as long as members of the community believe in it" (Zizek 38). If a community ceases to believe in the value of its Thing, the Thing no longer has meaning, and therefore no longer exists. For Arthur, the Thing is his sovereignty; it is his position of authority and the loyalty he gets from his courtiers. He fears what Zizek calls the "theft of enjoyment" by the Other, who in this case is Dame Ragnelle; the enjoyment is the pleasure he gets from his position of power. Ragnelle threatens Arthur's sovereignty both by taking Gawain's loyalty and assuming a sovereignty of her own, as I shall soon illustrate. By defying the ways of the court and influencing Gawain to do the same, she introduces the possibility that others, too, may cease to believe in the accepted ways. Perhaps Arthur sees her as a beginning

to the end of his way of life and his power.

Ironically, though, if we continue with Zizek's theory, we see that it is not really Dame Ragnelle that Arthur has to fear. Zizek explains that "what sets in motion this logic of the 'theft of enjoyment' is of course not immediate social reality— the reality of different ethnic communities living closely together— but the inner antagonism inherent to these communities" (Zizek 7). In other words, the threat to Arthur's sovereignty-Thing actually stems from the preexisting tensions within the court. Arthur and the other courtiers can conveniently displace their aggression onto the figure of the Other, but the tensions of the court existed before Ragnelle entered the scene.

In the final pages of the tale, the issue of sovereignty becomes very important. As the court celebrates Dame Ragnelle's transformation, several characters take the opportunity to clarify and reflect on the recent events. First, Arthur acknowledges his debt to Ragnelle in front of the court: "Than the Kyng them alle gan telle/ How did help hym att nede Dame Ragnelle,/ 'Or my dethe had bene dyghte'" (760-762). This public announcement solidifies Ragnelle's position of power as one to whom the king and the court are indebted. Next, Gawain explains how Ragnelle suffered from a spell cast upon her by her evil stepmother; this explanation helps erase the "loathly other" image and legitimate Ragnelle's place in the court. Finally, we hear the story of Dame Ragnelle's transformation from loathly to lovely. Significantly, it is Ragnelle, not Gawain, who relates to Arthur the wedding-night conversation about sovereignty:

Ther she told the Kyng fayre and welle
Howe Gawen gave her the sovereynte every delle,
And whate choyse she gave to hym
"God thank hym of his curtesye;
He savid me from chaunce and vilony
That was fulle foulle and grym.
Therefore, curteys Knyght and hend Gawen,

Shalle I nevere wrathe the serteyn,
That promyse nowe here I make.” (775-783).

This speech brilliantly mixes humility and power and sends a strong message to the King. Ragnelle makes it clear that Gawain gave her power only because she gave him the choice to do so, and she was the one who granted the reward. Likewise, if Gawain had chosen incorrectly, she would have been the one to cause his grief. Ultimately, Gawain decides to give his wife sovereignty, and in return, she promises to be obedient and loving. While this may seem like a bit of a paradox, it is clear that the power lies originally and most strongly with Ragnelle.

This message has direct implications for Arthur, which is why Ragnelle herself relates it to him; Ragnelle clearly has sovereignty over her husband, and her power extends to her King as well. Just as Gawain releases Ragnelle from the “voulle and grym” curse of loathliness, she herself rescued Arthur from the grim fate of death. To take this one step further, Ragnelle emphasizes that she will reward her husband with obedience, implying that Arthur should grant her the same reward. Arthur cannot challenge or disregard Ragnelle’s demand for sovereignty because of his debt to her and because of possible negative consequences, such as the further disruption she might cause in his court. Thus, he must surrender Gawain to Dame Ragnelle without complaint, regardless of how he or the court might suffer. In addition, he must agree to Ragnelle’s request that he forgive her brother.

She prayd the Kyng for his gentilnes,
“To be good lord to Sir Gromer, iwysse,
Of that to you he hathe offendyd,”
“Yes, Lady, that shalle I nowe for your sake,
For I wott welle he may nott amendes make;
He dyd me fulle unhend.” (811-816)

Dame Ragnelle boldly asserts her power so influence Arthur's political decisions. She nullifies or "steals" his ability to reestablish his sovereignty over Sir Gromer. Thus, the traditional operations of the court are further disrupted.

It should be quite clear now how the text establishes Ragnelle as Other and how her otherness affects the court's Thing and Arthur's sovereignty Thing. The task now is to determine what greater tensions lie behind this portrayal of otherness and its effect on the court. In this tale we see an interesting mix of issues dealing with spaces and identities that are shared but separate.

Directly related to the issue of sovereignty is the issue of space and location, for every king's power has a geographic boundary, and part of every person's identity stems from his location within a town, region, and/or nation. The text gestures toward a significance between Dame Ragnelle's bodily othering and her geographic distance from the court. Indeed, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue, the qualities of the physical body and geographic space are never entirely separable, and are, in fact, important concepts in defining cultural values and beliefs (Stallybrass). Insofar as Arthur's court represents the ideal England, Dame Ragnelle's physical otherness can be read as an attempt to establish the inferiority of those outside the courtly circle. But as the story progresses, this notion is seriously complicated. If, as the introduction tells us, "in his contry was nothyng butt chyvalry" (10) how do we explain the existence of characters such as Sir Gromer and Dame Ragnelle? The text questions the idea of an ideal kingdom unified under a central sovereign by showing the existence of such repulsive otherness within the borders of Arthur's country. There is obvious tension caused by the difference between the outlanders and the court, and this tension reflects the

limitations and disruptions of royal power.

The text has an obvious concern with geographic space and how it relates to sovereignty. As mentioned before, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* is a northern text, written by an author far removed from the court in London. Rosalind Field discusses some of the tensions that such authors had to balance. Because they were writing for a regional audience, there was a strong motivation to emphasize matters of local importance and promote regional identity. At the same time, even remote audiences were fascinated by the workings of the court and were interested in identifying with their leaders (Field 58-66). Thus, we get an interesting mix of praise for Arthur and critique of the court. The text opens by praising Arthur as a “Kyng curteys and royalle” and saying that “Of all kynges Arture berythe the flowyr,/ And of alle knyghtod he bare away the flowyr” (6-7). But both Arthur and his court undergo quite a bit of scrutiny as the tale progresses, as we have seen. The text patriotically celebrates its royal leadership as it simultaneously calls it to task for its weaknesses.

In the same paradoxical way, the author seems to want to both be identified with the court and retain the integrity of his own regional identity. The tale locates the court in Carlisle, closer to the northern home of the author and his audience than the medieval capital in London. This choice of location for Arthur and his followers can be read as an attempt to establish a close link between the royalty and a northern populace who might feel “othered” by the central court. By claiming Arthur, the North is also claiming the political power and historic glory that accompany his image, thus challenging the idea that power and honor is limited to London. In other words, the outlanders are patriotically declaring themselves part of Britain, and an important part at that! The tale makes it clear that just because a person is not located inside the court—the assumed locus of

power—does not mean that she lacks equal access to that power. Both Sir Gromer and Ragnelle illustrate how an outsider can gain control over a sovereign or change political structures, and through them, the author claims equal rights to power for the outlander.

In a less overtly political sense, the text tries to establish a commonality of character between the court and the subject. To gain the proper respect for outlanders, the text works to eliminate any negative stereotypes that might be associated with them. Perhaps northerners feared being viewed as inferior by the royal society, just as Ragnelle was viewed as crude and foul by Arthur's court. The text fights against such negative stereotypes by blurring the distinction between self and Other, or insider and outsider. Just as Sir Gromer and Dame Ragnelle share traits with the court (Sir Gromer's knighthood, Ragnelle transformed beauty and rank), so too do rural citizens consider themselves similar in many ways to their rulers.

Yet while the text attempts to establish commonalities between the central sovereign and the rural subjects, it also retains a strong sense of regional identity by emphasizing, even celebrating, the power of the Other. Even as the definition of otherness is called into question, the Other herself is clearly set apart. Ragnelle remains distinctly Other after her marriage and transformation because of the powerful position she holds in the court. Throughout this essay, I have discussed the court's reaction to Ragnelle in terms of Žižek's theory of the "Nation Thing." Before her transformation, the court fears that she will destroy their way of life, and after her marriage, Arthur sees her as a threat to his sovereignty. On one hand, the court seems excessively paranoid about the Other, but at the same time, the tale makes it impossible to minimize the importance of the Other by emphasizing how otherness can change a community. It may seem that if the community manages to incorporate the Other, the danger to its Thing will

be neutralized. However, the text illustrates that incorporation is neither an easy nor an effective as a way of protecting the Thing. Dame Ragnelle disrupts the court in a more profound, albeit more subtle way *after* her transformation/ incorporation. Thus, regional readers are given a sense of power as their role in the nation is illuminated by Ragnelle, and readers in the capitol are reminded of the importance of their outlying countrymen in the overall structure and balance of the kingdom. In addition, the texts issues a warning against efforts to incorporate or annex outsiders (or, more literally, their land) by showing how such actions might have negative consequences.

Anxiety about space and ownership are central to the text. The whole tale originates from Sir Gromer's complaint that Arthur has unfairly taken his land and given it to Sir Gawain. Ragnelle's excessive appetite, illustrated at the wedding feast, parallels Arthur's appetite for land. Just as the wedding is a legal process uniting two families, so too is an annexation a type of legal union of territories, although both parties may not be consenting. The results of such an annexation may not be as positive as a sovereign might hope, as the text illustrates through Ragnelle's "incorporation" into the court family. The text critiques political practices that benefit the royalty by depriving the citizens. Doing so is not only unfair, it is risky. Arthur wants to hold sovereignty over the territories and also over the hearts and minds of his knights; he even wants the loyalty of Sir Gromer, a strange knight, but still a subject. Yet here we see how these desire conflict; by taking the land, Arthur may gain Gawain's appreciation, but he loses the favor of Sir Gromer. He sacrifices the outsider for the sake of his own wishes to have happy knights inside his court. The text doubly illustrates how such a policy can backfire. First, Arthur nearly loses his life to Sir Gromer, a threat that illustrates the risk a sovereign takes when he provokes his subjects, and secondly, we see that generous gifts do not insure the

allegiance of knights like Gawain. While he may appreciate the gift, Gawain makes it apparent that his love and loyalty do not belong exclusively to Arthur, but rather center on his new wife. Both this concern with land annexation and the aforementioned disruption that Ragnelle causes to the court seem to warn against attempts at incorporation, or at least criticize an over-zealous government.

Further examination of the scene between Arthur and Sir Gromer reveals even more critique of the government's tendencies toward aggression. The confrontation between the two men illustrates an interesting reversal of power. Sir Gromer catches Arthur alone and unarmed except for his hunting bow, so he is able to demand that Arthur abide by his terms. The King, without armor, weapons, or knights, is powerless, just as a ruler without the power of his military can no longer conquer and consume lands or control an uncooperative populace. A king who does not have the support of his subjects is vulnerable, just as Arthur is helpless without his knights. The text subtly critiques excessive use of military power and the King's dependence upon it. Instead, a king should work with his citizens to earn their respect and loyalty. In addition, the power reversal in this scene demonstrates Northern demand for respect for their soldiers. In her "Military Intimacies" chapter, Patricia Ingham describes how some Arthurian texts privilege southern soldiers over those from the North (Ingham 168). In *The Wedding*, Arthur finds himself threatened and his authority compromised because he has privileged Sir Gawain over Sir Gromer. In order to maintain a strong and truly unified military, a ruler must be equally fair and respectful to *all* of his soldiers.

From its position "outside" the court, the text is able to critique what occurs on the inside of the royal household. In addition to being a direct parallel to Arthur's greed for territory, Dame Ragnelle's excess can be read as a Northern author's attempt chide the

central court for its lavish lifestyle. Accounts of courtly excess can easily be found in many Arthurian tales; in this tale, all the excess is projected onto Ragnelle. She is exceedingly ugly, she has a voracious appetite, and she relishes public display. Recall her demand for a public wedding and her lavish wedding gown: “She was arrayd in the rihest maner,/ More fressher than Dame Gaynour;/ Her arayment was worthe thre thowsand mark” (590-592). By emphasizing Ragnelle’s excesses, the text actually uses her as a vehicle for critiquing the court’s own propensity for excess. It is particularly interesting that the author mentions a specific monetary value for Ragnelle’s wedding gown. We can read this as a direct critique of a government’s management of money. To the citizens who pay the taxes to support it, a government often appears overly lavish in its lifestyle.

The concerns with power, military might, and land rights links directly to the text’s preoccupation with sovereignty and how it is used. Overall, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* raises question of how exactly sovereignty is obtained and how it should be used. Ragnelle makes Arthur realize that his sovereignty is vulnerable and dependent upon others- both those inside and outside his court. King, he can not rest comfortably in an elite existence. He must instead negotiate the tensions and problems that exist both within his court and in the outer regions of his kingdom. Eventually, this will mean dealing with the Other, and the text cautions against hasty or aggressive action. Annexation and incorporation prove to be risky and possibly even disastrous. The message that Ragnelle teaches to Arthur and that the medieval author sends to his royal leaders is that when sovereignty and otherness intersect, the definition and power of each must be reevaluated. As this tale does, we must question the otherness of the Other, the sovereignty of the Sovereign, and the power that each has to control or disrupt the other.

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**END OF
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