

The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

Pre-Christian Saga adapted from a mid-15th century poem fragment
and from listening to other variants of this legend from a number of storytellers

by Bluegrass Storyteller Chuck Larkin

This, pre-Christian Saga was adapted from a Mid 15th century poem fragment and from listening to other variants of this legend from a number of storytellers.

A well known variant to this theme, collected by Geoffrey Chaucer (AC 1343 - 1400), is "The Wife of Bath's Tale" published in "The Canterbury Tales". Chaucer has changed the knight of King Arthur into a knight who is a convicted rapist who weds a hag to save his life. The hag is in a grotesque physical form due to a spell placed on her by her brother. The Green Knight her brother has been changed into the Black Knight. In the Chaucer variations of the story one will note the lack of motivation as to the action of the brother in turning his sister into a hag and the other principal change in the later story variations occurs when sovereignty is delegated to the wife by the husband.

In recasting this story back into a pre-Christian leitmotif I used my knowledge of the old religions and the folkways of the Warrior. As example, what is the motivation that modifies the behavior of the Green Knight? Warriors traditionally held an enemy in great respect when displaying courage. In one major Civil War battle, an all Irish brigade attacked a Confederate position over and over and over again and each attacking wave of Irish warriors knew they would die and they did die. The confederate warriors began cheering this incredible display of courage.

Julius Caius Caesar, following a Roman victory in Gaul, noted with praise in his commentaries how a defeated army (Celts) chose death to slavery and in straight lines, line after line, naked they moved forward to be killed by the swords of the Roman legion. The Viking warrior and the Samurai warrior just before entering combat would look about themselves and consciously bring themselves into harmony with their environment and then create and deliver a poem about the beauty of nature about them. A common phrase used by warriors in many cultures as they went into certain death with valor " This is a good day to die."

One last piece of knowledge is the role of women warriors. In the older Celtic sagas and fragments of Roman history, husbands and wives were combat teams. Women warriors were the Gunny Sergeants training the next generation of warriors in order to keep the gender issues in balance.

It is with this knowledge I bridge the gaps in the story.

ONCE UPON A TIME, A LONG TIME AGO, a Celtic Welshman, whose ancestors reached back into Homer's ancient Troy where they fought against the Greek Agamemnon, this Celtic Welshman rose to be the first King Pendragon over the Kings of Wales, Cornwall, Manx, Scotland, Brittany and Ireland.

Arthur, named for the great She-Bear Goddess Artemis, born of the ninefold Sea-goddess and cast ashore on the ninth wave, to land at Merlin's feet.

King Arthur who still rests behind the vale in Avelon, was then Pendragon with 150 Knights of the round table.

Knights who in their day stood for courage, courtesy, generosity and fidelity to their word.

This tale begins when King Arthur was hunting. And with his great bow he wounded a magnificent white stag. And as hunters will do, even to this day, Arthur followed the stag deep, deep, deep into the woods, into a small glade shaded by eighteen great oak trees laced with mistletoe.

Suddenly King Arthur was confronted by a huge, giant knight dressed in shimmering green armor. "Ah, who dare hunt the stag in my wood?"

"I am King Arthur, Pendragon of these lands this be my wood."

"Arthur you are not my King Pendragon. This ancient sacred wood be my domain, my kingdom, and here I be the Wood Lord, and the old laws against poaching is death by beheading!"

The green knight began to draw his great broadsword, King Arthur dressed for hunting, without battle armor would only stand tall with the courage of knighthood. "Green knight, I hear your birds singing in yon tall trees, I see your aged Oaks are festooned with mistletoe, and your meadow with it's twisting, gurgling brook bedecked with bowers of flowers, hovering butterflies, buzzing bees and sheltered under white clouds floating through your blue sky. If Arthur must stand and die, what better day could be chosen so fair, for even the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle is in the air!"

"Ah, Arthur you have the courage of a warrior king. I'll tell you what I'll do. I will parole thee with riddle. Return within one year and a day, on your word, and bring a true

answer to this riddle question. Arthur, what thing is it that all women desire above all else. A false answer Arthur will be your death be it rain or shine. A true answer will be your pardon for poaching.”

King Arthur agreed and gave his word to return by the appointed time. During the year King Arthur, his knights and advisors went forth, north, south, east and west asking the riddle question and many, many, many answers did they receive. The year was near spent when King Arthur returned to the wood, mulling over in his mind the numerous answers, uneasy in thought, wondering if he had the true answer to the riddle question.

As Arthur reached the edge of the forest he came upon a hideous looking woman seated between a tall oak tree and a green holly tree, dressed in bright scarlet red. As Arthur was riding past the woman spoke.

“Arthur hold and look on this grim personage. I am Ragnell. Dame Ragnell and I am sister to the Green Knight. Arthur I know the true answer to your riddle. And Arthur, I would trade what I know for what I want, if you want to see the sun rise tomorrow.”

“Dame Ragnell, for my life, what thou want, on my oath, if able I will give.”

“Arthur what I wilt, for your life, is for thee to ask, thy nephew Sir Gawain, to wed me and become husband to Dame Ragnell.”

Let me tell you about Sir Gawain. Sir Gawain, who in his day, had the fairest flesh in the land. Sir Gawain who's strength and courage was greater than any knight of the Round Table. Sir Gawain who's strength and courage in battle increased three fold between mid morning and noon and mid afternoon and dusk. And when the battle raged upon him, Sir Gawain could walk across a meadow of grass and not bend a blade. Sir Gawain whom all other knights held in great reverence for gentle was his nature and great was his modesty.

And let me tell you about Dame Ragnell. She was incredibly ugly. Green tusks grew from her mouth and curled toward her ears. Her face was shaped with a snout with little red beady eyes. Her hair was matted with filth and little creatures crawled among the strands. Her bent and twisted hairy body with crooked legs and massive ankles was covered with open oozing sores. Her dugs hung below her knees.

But, let me tell you what King Arthur did not know. Yet our Celtic ancestors, listening to this story, two thousand years ago, knew and understood.

The ancient audiences knew when they heard the name Dame Ragnell that she was the raging storm, the devastating tornado, the erupting volcano.

The ancient audiences knew that Dame Ragnell was the great floods, the mud slides, the destructive earthquakes.

They also knew that Dame Ragnell was the rolling hills, the valleys, the snow topped mountains, the rippling brook, the waterfall, the lakes, the streams, the ground we walk on.

The ancient audience knew Dame Ragnell by many names: Morrigan, Bridget, Macha, Frey, Dana, Diana, The Queen of May, The lady of the Lake, who gave King Arthur his sword Excalibur.

You should know as they knew that Dame Ragnell, the sister, was our earth mother incarnate, the ninefold Goddess with nine faces and nine names.

And you should know that the Green Knight, Dame Ragnell's brother, King of the Sacred Grove, Dagda or Fray is that which lives and dies on mother earth. You should know that he is the spirit of vegetation, fertility, peace. He sends the rain, the sun shine, he makes the crops grow, mothers to bring forth, flocks and herds to multiply, even the crystals in mother earth to grow.

The Green Knight, is father May, and he was known too as Lug, Dionysus, Osires, Adonis and the Celt's Aryan ancestors, the Kurgans, who crossed the Himalayan mountains into India called him Krishna.

But King Arthur, the Celtic Pendragon, in this story, did not know this ancient knowledge. King Arthur did not know who Dame Ragnell was but he did know and love his nephew Sir Gawain. And he did know Sir Gawain as a loyal, courteous and generous knight.

And did I tell you the ladies knew the handsome knight Sir Gawain? Did I tell you the ladies knew that Sir Gawain's words, thoughts and acts were always in balance? Did I tell you the ladies knew Sir Gawain never told a lie. Did I tell you the ladies knew he was integrity and fidelity. Did I tell you he was loved. Did I tell you he was chivalry.

“Dame Ragnell, I will ask Sir Gawain to be thy wife but I will not command, it will be his choice.”

Dame Ragnell smiled and nodded her head and told King Arthur the true answer to the riddle question.

Arthur entered the forest and again found the Green Knight.

“Augh, Arthur! Do you have true answer to my riddle?”

Answer after answer after answer Arthur gave, collected from all his advisors and to each the Green Giant said, nay.

The Green Knight began to draw his sword. “Hold thy hand Green Knight there be one more answer to what all women desire above all else and that be sovereignty, the right to choose, the right to be free from outside interference.”

“Well, Pendragon Arthur, you have learned your lesson well. I pardon thee from poaching.”

Arthur thanked the Green Knight and returned again to Tintagle but now with a heavy heart. He sought out his nephew Sir Gawain and told him of his agreement with Dame Ragnell and described her in all her odorous foulness. And Sir Gawain said, “Be not concerned uncle I will wed the lady.” And he persisted, and Arthur reluctantly consented.

The wedding day arrived and the wedding took place on the rising sun but not with the usual jocularity. All had a heavy heart at this wedding for even after cleansing Dame Ragnell was unsightly.

That afternoon Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell talked of many things and as the sun set, they retired to their rooms. Sir Gawain turned to fall asleep. “Sir Gawain, be it not your duty on your wedding night to bid thy wife a good night before sleep?”

And Sir Gawain answered, “Aye, It be my duty to bid my wife a good night, and to kiss my wife and to hug my wife and more too and all that I will do!”

And turning hand and eye to his wife he found beauty! “Ahhh, husband, you like this form? But first you must choose. I can be beautiful for you at night or beautiful for your friends by day, but not both, I must share my other form.”

“Lady Ragnell. You have your own will I yield to your choice.”

And the Lady Ragnell having sovereignty recognized, chose to be beautiful both day and night. And the handsome Sir Gawain and the beautiful Lady Ragnell choose to be faithful to each other throughout their lives.

This be the end of this old legend, The Green Knight, well he later became a Knight of the Round Table. However our ancient ancestors, when they heard this legend, they were reminded that not only was this legend about a woman’s right of sovereignty but also when exercising choice one needs to stay in balance with the people one is bonded to. Did not Lady Ragnell choose on behalf of her mate. These legends reminded one of the bonding between a young couple that lasts into the craggy lines of old age, the love of the young for the old, the love of a parent for a child who is not perfect. The ancient Celts understood that in this legend not only was Dame Ragnell a manifestation of the Earth Mother but so was the perfect man Sir Gawain also a manifestation of the Earth Mother and so was the Green Knight but one more manifestation of the Earth Mother who in olden times came to us in many forms in order to teach us how to live one with the other.