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The Politics of Politeness in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

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Introduction

In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, a popular 15th century poem featuring the medieval trope of the transformation of the 'loathly lady', politeness, chivalric conduct, and sociability are predicated by political discourses that negotiate both the hierarchisation of gender and the attenuation of homosocial order. The loathly lady romance is a literary form in which a hag transforms into a beautiful maiden in order to test the fortitude of chivalric order. This archetype has been reimagined and re-codified to translate various political agendas; however, *The Wedding* medieval manuscript, preserved in a sixteenth-century copy in Oxford[1], exhibits its own potent, prescient, and provocative inferences worthy of critical examination. Anonymously transcribed in the sixteenth century, MS Bodleian 11951 details the Wedding and, according to its contemporary translator and editor, Thomas Hahn, 'is one of the most popular stories of late medieval England'(40). Locating itself between Carlisle and Inglewood Forest, the romance demonstrates 'regional coherence'(Hahn) within Arthurian cycles[2]. However, by introducing her grotesque otherness to the Arthurian court, Ragnelle's disregard for polite sensibilities counters the chivalric codification of feminine courtliness. The loathly lady romance, either in its entirety or in its elements, has been retold since in the middle ages in various forms. Ragnelle can therefore be situated within traditions of *Sheela-na-gig*, Celtic carvings which are 'exaggerated portrayals of female genitalia' and invoke the *vagina dentata* (Leech: 216)[3]; pig-faced woman legends[4], such as Tannakin Skinker, who can only be delivered from her curse through marriage; and iterations of the frog prince and the beauty and the

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[1] Bodleian MS 11951, formerly Rawlinson C.86.

[2] '[Sir Gromer] and his bewitched sister inhabit Inglewood Forest (lines 16, 152, 764, 835), the Cumberland setting for *Avowyng*, *Awntyrs*, and, by implication, for *Marriage*. In addition, the Round Table resides at Carlisle (lines 127, 132, 325), a center for Arthurian adventures in *Carlisle, Avowyng, Awntyrs, Greene Knight, Marriage, and Carle*'. (Hahn:41)

[3] Mary Leech: 216: 'Lorraine Kochanske Stock compares the loathly Lady to representations of Celtic Sheela-na-gigs. These figures, found primarily on religious and civic structures, emphasise femininity through exaggerated portrayals of female genitalia [which] relates to Dame Ragnell as well'.

[4] 'Variations of Dame Ragnell also evolved beyond the medieval period. In the seventeenth century, the tale of Tannakin Skinker reflected a related genre involving pig-faced women. According to a pamphlet published in 1640, Skinker was a Dutch woman who had been 'bewitched in her mother's womb' to become a 'Hog-faced Gentlewoman'[…] Like Dame Ragnell and John Gower's loathly lady (whose story the pamphlet retells), Skinker can be delivered from the ugly spell only by marriage.'(Henderson: 39)

beast[5]. Moreover, the loathly lady tale bears a resemblance to examples in contemporary cinema, including *Teeth* (2007)[6], *Penelope* (2006), *Nanny McPhee* (2005), and, with the most direct parallels, *Shrek* (2001), which spawned the second most commercially successful animated franchise of all time.

Tales of the loathly lady are conventional in chivalric romance; an eligible knight agrees to marry an old hag, who in turn transforms into a beautiful maiden when the knight breaks the curse defiling her. Often, this romantic trope is twinned with a riddle about feminine sovereignty. *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* is one such romance, in that it tells the tale of a loathly lady who facilitates her marriage to one of King Arthur's knights, Gawain. Like many antagonistic figures within the romance genre, the threat Ragnelle poses to the Arthurian court is incorporated into its identity and alters chivalric stability. While ostensibly being assimilated into the court, I will argue that Ragnelle's transgressive potential persists from within. Her transformation alters 'the nature of chivalric virtue'(Hahn: footnote 805); at the beginning, Arthur's land is completely free from cowardice ('In his contrey was nothyng butt chyvalry /And knyghtes were belovid by that doughty, /For cowardes were everemore shent'[7](10-12); by the end, his most honourable knight lays in bed with Ragnelle 'as a coward'[8] (808-9) and shirks his knightly obligations. Ragnelle recreates a romance tradition by challenging the homosocial order of Arthur's court, by introducing a potent feminine alterity and attenuating the power of the masculine hierarchy. In this sense, the romance is

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[5] 'An early tale of a beauty and beast arose in *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* (late fifteenth century), in which the ugly hag Dame Ragnell played both beauty *and* beast.' (Henderson: 37)

[6] From Monstrous Femininity and the Female Body in Medieval Chivalric Romance by Jenny L. Howe: '*Teeth* is often more funny than horrifying, but beneath its humor swirls a heavy subtext of cultural anxiety concerning female corporeality. Because Dawn's body is the source of her power, the female body is marked by the film as both other and frightening' (2).

'Dame Ragnell's toothy, "boarish" grin recalls the vagina dentata … it is possible to see these descriptions of Dame Ragnell's mouth as crudely resembling a vagina[…] This commingling of bodily orifices speaks to an eroticism of disgust at work in the poem. The narrator in The Weddynge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell returns repeatedly to this loathly lady's body, and her grotesque mouth in particular. […] The narrator's obsession with her body, and specifically her mouth, invokes this eroticism of disgust, lacing his depiction of her mouth with carnality through his incessant gaze' (45-46).

[7] In [Arthur's] country, there was nothing by chivalry/And knights were beloved to that brave warrior/ For cowards were always disgraced'

[8] 'As a coward [Gawain] lay by [Ragnelle] bothe day and nyghte,/Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte'. This may be translated in modern English as 'As a coward he lay by Ragnelle both night and day/Never to pursue jousting as normal'

narratively conventional, in that it foregrounds Arthur's chivalric order as compelling and victorious, as it permits even the most obstinately peculiar Ragnelle to find her place within. However, it also permits the feminine Other[9] to reconstitute the knightly hierarchy by challenging the male order and empowering female alterity. Leech notes this contradiction, suggesting that 'to preserve the ideals of the culture, [courtly society] must open itself up to something it fears as contaminative of its central values' (217). Moreover, the hag's 'presence in the court unsettles the physical boundaries between the court and the forest, literally bringing the outside inside, but more importantly, the hag […]disrupts the cultural homogeneity of the court through her monstrous otherness'(Howe: 53). Feinstein further suggests that '[t]he popularity of this figure in the high Middle Ages' may be due to 'social politics, notably the changing role of the elderly, which, as has been argued by historians, significantly influenced psychology, the arts, and relations between generations' (24). Continuing, she posits that 'new distributions of power developing from demographic changes may partly account for the overdetermined medieval representations of a type of old woman, one independent and insistent on her desires' (24). These demographic changes include the plague's decimation of eligible brides and grooms, which resulted in young people 'being affianced' to much older people, as 'the age gap was accentuated and the availability of suitable matches strained'(24). It has been said that the prevalence of loathly lady literary figures in the medieval period stem from anxieties around such age gaps, given that it had the potential to empower older widows and dowagers, who obtained control over their property and lands.

The Wedding was transcribed from a sixteenth century manuscript, Bodleian 11951 (formerly Rawlinson C.86) by Thomas Hahn in his 1995 book edition Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales. Hahn's translation is accessible, widely available, and includes extensive footnotes on the text, explaining the motivations behind his translation choices. The manuscript, and subsequently Hahn's translation, is incomplete in that at least one leaf is missing or destroyed. However, there is evidence

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[9] Feinstein suggests that 'the Other' is 'represented in [loathly lady tales] as bewitched female characters, ugly as can be imagined or as old age' (40). Likewise, Henderson writes that 'spectators' identify the otherness and ugliness of figures that occupy 'a tenuous space between the known and unknown, the understood and misunderstood, the fit and misfit, the included and outcast' (26-27).

that this tale was widely consumed and reiterated in dramatic forms, for example, and Hahn posits that this Arthurian episode 'is one of the most popular stories of late medieval England'. As noted by both Hahn and Niebrzydowski, a loathly lady tale similar to *the Wedding* 'served for the plot of an interlude performed at one of Edward I's Round Tables in 1299' (Hahn:40). Niebryzdowski contextualises this by suggesting that '[f]ifteenth-century audiences had an appetite for humorous imitation of romance […]The *Dame Ragnell* poet, responding to market forces, parodies a pre-existing narrative in which a loathly lady's wisdom saves the life of an aristocratic hero, thereby putting new wine into an old bottle'(89); she, too, informs her analysis with the performance for Edward I, recorded in 'Lodewijk van Velthem's 1316 continuation of Jacob van Maerlant […] the *Spiegel historiael* (*Mirror of History*)'(90).

The Ragnelle tale is only one iteration of loathly lady romances, derived from a range of 'early European vernacular stories [that] retell the plot of a loathly lady who, in return for certain crucial information or power, demands some sign of sexual favour from a hero, and is then transformed by the hero's compliance'(Hahn: 41). Like Hahn, John Bugge affirms the Celtic roots of the romance, suggesting that the romance is a 'fertility myth, Celtic in provenance but doubtless Neolithic in origin[…] Irish versions of the Loathly Lady story provide the earliest instantiations of this myth in the British Isles, but there is more to their meaning than just natural fecundity'(198). Bugge encourages critics 'to examine the traditional mythic features of *Weddynge* that still retain latent significance as constituent elements in a more up-to-date fifteenth-century fertility myth'(200).

In spite of the prevalence of this chivalric trope, *The Wedding* is distinct from its loathly lady analogues, such as Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and Gower's *Tale of Florent* from *Confessio Amantis*, both written in the late 14th century. For example, although both presenting the pursuit of female sovereignty as a central drive, these loathly lady tales do not bestow a name or title upon their hags in the same way as *the Wedding*. Forste-Grupp suggests that this namelessness leaves the ladies with a 'lack of identity [and] proclaims [them] to be of no significance in comparison to the named males who contract social alliances by aligning the unnamed hag within their patriarchal families and

feudal bonds'(106). By naming her Dame Ragnell, *the Wedding* 'refuses to allow the reader or audience to consign her to the faceless group of other unnamed heiresses married for their dowers and family connections instead of themselves' (106). Moreover, Feinstein and Niebrzydowski both note that Ragnelle diverges from her analogous sister in that her hideousness is derived from her outward monstrousness, rather than agedness; they both maintain that, unlike her contemporaries, Ragnelle possesses a youthfulness[10]. Additionally Feinstein suggests that *the Wedding* is entrenched in sovereign-subject relations: the King's life is under threat, rather than the hag's prospective husband, who in this case is the notoriously honourable Gawain and not a 'boorish unnamed rapist'(Feinstein: 40). Through this, *the Wedding* connects the gender politics of feminine sovereignty to a wider political and hierarchical dynamics at play, including the theme of primogeniture explored by Forste-Grupp. Moreover, through 'the fusion of a Sir Gawain narrative with the loathly lady motif, [and] Dame Ragnell's youth and her appetite'(Niebrzydowski: 100), Ragnelle has plenty of space to *be* hideous; to explore her own grotesquerie, to make demands not only of her groom, but the King himself, and refigure, literally and metaphorically, the loathly lady into one that radically challenges the expectations of conduct in the Middle Ages.

I have chosen to examine how Ragnelle pushes the boundaries of feminine politeness in three channels; firstly, that of her physical appearance; secondly, the way in which she 'outmanoeuvres'(Forste-Grupp: 188) men for her fiscal security; and thirdly, her negotiation of the strict temporality of Arthurian order. Here, I define politeness as behaviour that conforms to any dominant discourse of conduct, respectability, and complicity. Therein, impoliteness can be defined as a disregard (although not necessarily unawareness) of such social codes, which I will argue, are politically and socially charged categories. While not restrictive and oppressive in and of themselves, codes of politeness in medieval literature can parasitically replicate pernicious gender and aesthetic

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[10] Feinstein: '[Ragnelle's] hideousness has less to do with aging [sic] as typically represented than with a burlesque portrait of conventional ugliness' (38).
Niebrzydowski: 'Dame Ragnell is monstrous yet retains a youthful appearance' (89).

hierarchies; instead of signifying deference and respect, they may work to demarcate social differences and therefore harbour a multitude of prejudices. The following quote from *Bodies That Matter* helps to define the politics, or perhaps politicisation, of politeness that I aim illustrate through the character of Ragnelle:

> [t]o call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and serve very different political aims. (Butler: 6).[11]

That is to say, how are the politics of politeness, as previously defined in the tradition of medieval romance, shown in the *Wedding*? What political aims do the politics of politeness in this romance serve? How does Ragnell exceed and defy this politicisation and, in doing so, redefines her own identity within the Arthurian court? Rather than considering the origins of politeness in medieval literature, I aim to discuss how the representation of 'impolite' bodies engage with their political backdrop, through their *un*refined, *un*civilised and, ultimately, *un*settling semiotics. Primarily, I will argue that the politics of politeness are deeply entrenched in gender hierarchies that seek to exclude, subjugate, and control feminine bodies.

Feminine Politeness and Social Conduct

Susan Udry's study of Robert de Blois and Geoffroy IV de la Tour Landry's conduct literatures for young women can illustrate the politicalisation of politeness. From de Blois' *Chastoiement des dames* (The Ladies' Instruction), Udry derives the idea that 'feminine beauty […] plays such a crucial role in public "cortoisie,"' (94). Informed by Roberta Krueger, she writes that 'works of moral conduct might not necessarily have served to confirm traditional gender categories'(90); rather, the 'discourse of practical sociability' in the *Chastoiement*, which gives 'advice about appearing pretty, cultured, and well instructed'(95), constitutes more than just a reconciliation of ostensible sensuality and

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[11] Of course, Butler's work discusses the performativity of gender in a sociological and contemporary context and her theories should not be misconstrued with the constructions of gender in the Middle Ages. However, this quote best differentiates between the political interests of politeness and the acts of politeness themselves.

chastity. In fact, Udry suggests that 'the need for a lady to discipline her eyes, lips, and breasts become significantly more complex when they are read in the context of [de Blois'] statements about a woman's personal appearance:

> Robert's overriding concern is with feminine beauty as a means of establishing and maintaining smooth social interactions between members of different classes […] The imagery he uses is not of sensuality, but of beauty as a practical social concern. (95)

These treatises on moral conduct and medieval "beauty tips" exceed the parochial realm of domestic life. Instead, feminine beauty, be that courtesy or physical appeal, ensured hierarchical interactions were graceful. A woman's outward equanimity reflected social harmony and compliance. Udry compares this with de la Tour Landry's disdain for "unnatural" feminine beauty, particularly cosmetics and fashion, which are 'a potential threat to social order because he links feminine beauty directly to divinely created identity'(101). The cosmetic augmentation of the feminine form was disfavoured by the Chevalier due to 'anxieties about the possibility that a woman could upset the order of the sexes simply by altering her appearance'(101). In these texts, a woman's appearance and her conduct are entangled to the point that their dissension poses a threat to the sexual and social categories of medieval culture. The radical social disruption of altering one's appearance is particularly relevant to *the Wedding*, in addition to the assumption that 'bel maintien'[12](96) is conducive not only to smooth romantic interaction, but also an indicator of public harmony. Susan Udry's analysis of French conduct literature, particularly as a source of misogynistic scorn for overtly expressive and uncivilised women, draws unsurprising similarities with contemporary discourse. These conduct literatures, in their attempts to elide uncouth, licentious, and impolite female bodies, affirm the power of them; their homogenisation of a feminine type deemed demure, submissive, or contained emphasises the significance of the contrary in medieval literature. The representation of feminine conduct in medieval texts conflates parochial, societal, and political narrative threads; female politeness has been both *essentialised* –that is, materialised in the female body– while also

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[12] good carriage.

being socially inculcated through conduct literature and law. Feminine impoliteness, particularly Ragnelle's insistence on her rights and desires in *the Wedding*, continue to be relevant to our cultural moment, in which feminine rage, dissatisfaction, and expressive alterity are interpreted as ugly and inherently unfeminine. Manners, humbleness, and humility, which Udry notes are deeply connected with medieval "beauty tips" of chivalric culture, are what de Blois purports make a woman both marriageable and socially respectable. However, what makes *the Wedding* particularly interesting to both the contemporary moment and the medieval literary canon, is that Ragnelle emphatically rejects these tropes; not only is she ugly by default, she also chooses to be difficult, public, coarse, and unrefined in her interactions. In doing so, her feminine status is matched only by that of Queen Gaynor by the end of the romance[13]. Surprisingly, Ragnell is rude, repulsive, demanding, insistent, *and* she obtains an almost unmatched position in the Arthurian court, *because of* these traits, not *in spite of* them. Through ostensible defiance, rather than covert complicity, she orchestrates her rise to power in *the Wedding* through the politics of politeness. This begs the question, what political aims does the conduct of sociability seek to achieve? What power is there in feminine impoliteness and how does Ragnelle's recalcitrance dramatically challenge gender ontologies at play in *the Wedding*?

Criticism of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

Recent contributions to this critical field include Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp's 2002 article *A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in "The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell"*. Forste-Grupp purports the Wedding to be a

> commentary on issues of contemporary inheritance laws and customs of primogeniture, which privileged a single male heir in order to maintain the original land grant and which denied female siblings equal rights of inheritance and, as a result, self-determination, authorization, and independence. (107)

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[13] '[Ragnelle] negotiates for herself a position in court second only to that of Arthur's queen Gaynor'(Forste-Grupp, 118)/ 'Of fayrnesse she bare away the bewtye'(803), may be translated to 'She bore the prize for beauty' or fairness.

In this compelling article, she argues that 'Dame Ragnell does achieve a small, significant victory in the patriarchal world of Arthur's court because she circumvents the laws of primogeniture'(122). Through this, Forste-Grupp highlights Ragnell's choice of husband as tactful:

> [t]his apparently innocent request on Ragnell's part to marry Gawain becomes quite intriguing in the context of her sibling relationship with Gromer and Gawain's *seisin* of the lands which her brother claims are his […]possession of which would integrate one of them into court society and would confer upon one title, status, authority and wealth. (115)

Forste-Grupp's work will be influential in my analysis due to the political agenda that she traces in Ragnelle's circumvention of primogeniture laws. Moreover, her suggestion that Ragnell's repulsive appearance actually serves her in her endeavour to recover her inheritance, as it 'frees her from medieval strictures regarding female behaviour -silence, modesty, humility'(116) is a jumping off point for my consideration of Ragnelle's recalcitrant rudeness.

In 2004, John Bugge contributed to the critical discussion of the Wedding through his aforementioned paper *Fertility Myth and Female Sovereignty in the Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*. In this, Bugge equates Ragnell with an earth goddess and Gawain with a usurper to the position of the sun-god, occupied by Ragnell's brother, Sir Gromer Somer Joure, meaning 'man of summer's day', or summer solstice (200). Ragnelle's rejuvenation, therefore, is a metaphor for securing the 'fruitfulness of the land' (198). Moreover, he writes that the '*Weddynge* certainly exhibits collective male anxiety about a hero's acquiescing to female desire, but it also "proves" through its storybook happy ending that such anxiety is not only groundless but, more important, even detrimental to the continuance of the race'(212). Gawain must see fair and foul as a 'false dichotomy'; he must accept the "foul," the blatant, unruly fact of female desire, as coequal to the "fair" and acquiesce in the eternal ambivalence of the two in one'(205). Through this argument, Bugge posits that the overall aim of the poem is to encourage a male audience 'to overcome his instinctive anxiety about the dark threat of female desire and to achieve a new level of consciousness in which he can acknowledge both its validity and its necessity'(206). Bugge's argument pertains in large part to discussion of both mythic and medical allegory in the romance, which are not central to my analysis of Ragnelle's impoliteness. However, the engaging, well-informed, and detailed paper still richly

informs this thesis; moreover, the conclusions Bugge draws that posit the didactic potential and cultural significance of the romance inform my understanding of the feminine power Ragnelle secures for herself.

In 2007, Mary Leech published *'Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die: Feminine Usurpation of Male Authority in 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell''*. She, too, affirms that Ragnelle is 'unique' (213) among loathly lady tales, citing this difference in the great contrasts between the beastly bride and the honourable Gawain, 'the perfect chivalrous knight'. Leech understands the complexity of Ragnelle's appearance not as a simple category of ugly, but as grotesque, writing that with 'her body in a state of continual fluctuation and formation, she acts as a regenerative signifier for the problems within the social structure that are also in a process of continual flux reformation'(222). Additionally, Leech's article is an excellent resource in situating the text within the traditions of chivalric romance, as an external threat to the Arthurian circle.

The 2010 article *Monstrous Appetite and Belly Laughs: A Reconsideration of the Humour in the Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell* by Sue Niebryzdowksi examines the comic potential of feminine appetite and table manners for a medieval audience. The ideas of uncivilised, uncontained, and repulsive, according to Niebryzdowski, compel the audience to look *at* Ragnell, rather than encourage them to look *away*, through the humorous disparagement of her looks. She writes that 'Ragnell's lack of table manners and her ungoverned eating, and the aristocratic discomfiture at this expressed in the poem, are amusing' (96). Continuing, Niebryzdowski relates these comic scenes with the grotesque:

> With her excessive size and her inability to observe etiquette (she eats too much and with too much gusto), Dame Ragnell is an embodiment of the Bakhtinian 'grotesque': the body that is uncontained, unruly, uncontrolled by notions of propriety and good manners, and is thus animalistic. As such, Ragnell is assumed by all watching to have become monstrous through ungoverned and ungovernable appetite and is reviled by an Arthurian court that considered itself emblematic of all things civilized. (97)

In addition to specifically informing the impoliteness of Ragnelle's eating, Niebrzydowski locates the loathly lady as a site of medieval humour. She introduces the radical alterity that Ragnelle poses through her table manners to the Arthurian court as a signifier of refinement and chivalric coding.

While I agree with the analysis of comic potential that the loathly lady represents, my argument will counter this with by highlighting Ragnelle's resistance to chauvinistic derision and misogynistic disparagement. In spite of this, Niebrzydowski's work is particularly informative and provides in-depth context for the way in which a story such as Ragnelle's would have been consumed by medieval subjects.

Sandy Feinstein's *Longevity and the Loathly Ladies in Three Medieval Romances* discusses two of *the Wedding*'s analogues: Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Gower's *Tale of Florent*. She contextualises the prevalence of loathly lady figures, suggesting that 'demographic changes' derived from the plague 'decimating the young' contributed to an increased amount of marriages between older men and younger women, and vice versa (24). Feinstein writes that 'new distributions of power developing from demographic changes may partly account for the overdetermined medieval representations of a type of old woman, one independent and insistent on her desires' (24). Like Forste-Grupp, Feinstein locates the narrative drive in 'property' (36). Moreover, she discusses whether Ragnell is old, concluding that 'her hideousness has less to do with ageing as typically represented than with a burlesque portrait of conventional ugliness'(38). While she does not specifically cover the politics of politeness, Feinstein does locate the loathly lady romance trope in its political context, citing its popularity in demographic and social changes that relate it to the wider medieval humour and anxiety about unsuitable pairings, such as Januarie and May in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. Ultimately, Feinstein's piece is essential for any discussion of *the Wedding* due to its detailed critical analysis and political contextualisation of the romance.

The Wedding is briefly mentioned by Gretchen E. Henderson in 2015 in her book *Ugliness: A Cultural History.* Here, Henderson identifies Ragnelle as a figure who occupies 'a tenuous space between the known and unknown, the understood and misunderstood, the fit and misfit, the included and outcast' (26). Importantly, she discusses how fear around ugly bodies have been propagated by the idea that 'aberrancy within the corporeal order is an aberrancy in the social order'(34); pernicious theories arise around anomalous bodies 'to confront fears about cultural change'(35). She writes that

in *the Wedding*, Ragnelle plays 'both beauty *and* beast'(37); '[t]hrough a series of oaths, her physical appearance and behaviour transform to uphold the order of the kingdom'(38). Henderson's analysis of the romance and her wider examination of the politically charged category of 'ugly' are particularly relevant to my discussion of the politics of politeness as they can contextualise the elision of ugly people from 'refined' or 'civilised' society and the default conflation of impolite and ugly, not only in the medieval period, but in subsequent literary eras. By specifically locating Ragnelle in a historical lineage of 'ugly' figures, Henderson's book questions the discomfort and fascination with the statistically abnormal figures in art and literature.

Jenny L. Howe's 2014 paper *Monstrous Femininity and the Female Body in Medieval Chivalric Romance* thoroughly discusses the Wedding; she affirms that 'the hag [signifies] the unruly disorder of the medieval menstruating/reproductive female body that so threatened the integrity of the masculine form through its leaky unstable borders, thus externalising these patriarchal fears of (dis)integration'(59). Through gender and body politics, Howe's paper is particularly useful in discussing how 'these hags reify the unruly, often dangerous, disorder attributed to the interiority of the female body'(28). While not specifically covering the politicisation or gendering of politeness, her discussion of the externalised social threats the loathly lady poses to the chivalric court are rich, interesting, and significant to my research surrounding the feminine grotesque in *the Wedding*.

Grotesque

Here, I must also touch upon Bakhtin's grotesque. While medieval understandings of the grotesque may be entirely divorced from its contemporary manifestations, Ragnell's unbounded eating and excessive size cast her as characteristically grotesque in a number of ways. For instance, Ragnelle's hideousness is 'withoute mesure' (229), so abundant in fact that 'to reherse the fowlnesse of that Lady, Ther is no tung may telle, securly'(243-4). Not only is she visually excessive, therefore, but she also 'exceeds corporeal and discursive boundaries' (Howe: 35). Leech writes that Ragnelle's body 'displays what is usually hidden in the body –its interior– and in doing so challenges the

boundaries of the body and the society from which that body emerges […] the grotesque body [is] revealed, and revealing'(214). Like Sheela-na-gig, the portrait of Ragnelle is concerned with 'the lower stratum of the body'(Bakhtin: 21); that is, 'apertures or convexities'(26), anywhere which the body can exceed its own borders and the inside can become outside, or vice versa. It conveys a state of constant flux; ever-growing, ever-decaying, its images of excess rupture, literally and metaphorically, any sense of containment or finality. This 'deeply positive'(62) break down of boundaries means that the 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; [rather,] they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people'(7). Moreover, manifestations of the grotesque body do not refer to 'isolated biological individual', but to the collective ancestral body of all the people'(19). Through this, grotesque realism, like carnivalesque literary modes, conveys a 'suspension of all hierarchical precedence', it is 'a consecration of inequality' (10). Thus, the excess and the bodily transgression through which Ragnelle explores her chivalric impoliteness is situated within a discourse of grotesque realism, and in turn, alludes to its conditions of simultaneous formlessness and abundance.

The Foulest Creature

The gap in this critical field, therefore, is that Ragnelle's impoliteness is generally considered to be assimilated into the court, elided from view, and homogenised. However, it is Ragnelle's impoliteness that radically challenges the expectations of the court and is equally as contentious as Sir Gromer's threat to Arthur's life, in that she conducts herself with both subterfuge and outward coarseness. Moreover, most critical approaches to the romance vindicate the active and even powerful role of women in the medieval period, who have long been considered passive, auxiliary, and thereby powerless. The loathly lady romance persists in contemporary discourse and the fascination with feminine transformation has similarly transported ideas about politeness. To some extent, the uglification or beautification of women and the implications of their courtesy and behaviour has been a popular trope in a wide range of literature, from Medusa, to popular fairytales, to modern cinema.

These renditions all equate outward hideousness and incivility with internal monstrousness, before throwing all of these presuppositions into question through the resolution of the tale. Despite this, it will be important to discuss Ragnelle's ugliness without the contemporary political agendas relating to gender which, infused with the ideologies surrounding nationalism, capitalism, and essentialism, declare their presence in both the collective imagination of the medieval past and neomedieval texts. By sloughing away these presuppositions and conducting a close reading of *the Wedding*, the discourse of politeness can be seen to be politically agential and ideological through the theoretical concepts of the untimely, the grotesque, and performative identity politics. The most important theoretical concepts in this discussion are the grotesque, the untimely, the performativity of medieval gender identity.

Chapter 1, "That praty, fowlle dameselle': The Aesthetics of Ugliness", locates *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* within a discussion of medieval aesthetics and the concept of the grotesque. Informed by Umberto Eco and Gretchen E. Henderson, this chapter extrapolates the indomitable power of ugliness and examines the polarising categorisations of beautiful and ugly and how we, as ideological subjects, internalise these concepts. Moreover, the politicisation of Ragnelle's impolite and unrefined behaviour is related to how her external impoliteness represents the fear of aberrancy within the Arthurian court.

Chapter 2, "Politics, Politeness, and Primogeniture: Identity and Legal Status", considers the theme of primogeniture, as informed by Forste-Grupp, and examines how Ragnelle navigates her political and legal position in the narrative through subterfuge. Moreover, it contextualises the social and legal categorisations women may fear or aspire to in the medieval period. Ultimately, this chapter examines how women's outward behaviour and reputation as either polite or impolite had dramatic effects on their legal standing, their gender identity, and their social status.

Chapter 3, "Untimeliness: Politeness and Punctiliousness", is motivated by a discussion of temporality, particularly how Ragnelle disrupts established temporal dichotomies and cycles. Moreover, it considers the recalcitrance of Ragnelle's power through her radical disruption of

temporal order. Timeliness and politeness are obviously categories interwoven in that they inform one another –lateness and hastiness are likewise considered impolite– but in this chapter I wish to consider the gender implications of temporal disruption as a cite of Ragnelle's radical impoliteness.

Chapter 1

'That praty, fowlle dameselle': The Aesthetics of Ugliness in _The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle_

Ragnell is unquestionably and emphatically hideous; she is described by the narrator, King Arthur, and Sir Gromer as 'that praty, fowlle dameselle'(615:54), 'so foulle a Lady'(306:27), and 'that old scot'(476:41). More than that, she is 'that foule unswete'(522:45), meaning 'an ill-favored woman, a hag'(MED); a woman so grotesquely ugly that she takes on an implicit villainy, an accursedness so profound that Arthur 'had greatt shame' to walk next to her. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Ragnelle's ugliness is exacerbated by her insistence on being seen, on being in the public eye. While this public aspect of her hag status is not exclusive to the Middle Ages[14], the implicit visceral shame that she brings on the court in this form, opposed to her post-transformation beauty, can reveal much about the gender and body politics of medieval literature. Although not explicitly mentioned in _The Wedding_, for the sake of this discussion, I wish to commandeer the word _hag_, which is commonly defined as '[a]n evil spirit, dæmon, or infernal being, in female form'(_OED_). The term may also convey a human figure, opposed to a supernatural or mystical one; 'an ugly, repulsive old woman: often with implication of viciousness or maliciousness'. The _OED_ lists _The Winter's Tale_ as an example of this definition,

> *a*1616 W. Shakespeare _Winter's Tale_ (1623) ii. iii. 108 *A grosse Hagge*: And Lozell, thou art worthy to be hang'd, That wilt not stay her Tongue.

This line is one of the many insults with which Leontes berates the women in _The Winter's Tale_. Tongues consistently allude to misogynistic disparagement throughout the play. From scorn for women's excessive gossiping, being 'of boundless tongue' (2.3.91), to women's silence when 'tongue tied'(1.2.27) indicating deceit, women's voices as _hags_ are ostensibly discredited by the king. This

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[14] Gretchen E. Henderson's book, Ugliness: A Cultural History, highlights examples of misogynistic and ableist moments which restricted the visibility of 'ugly' or 'abnormal' people, including 'The Ugly Laws' in the US during the 1880's, which 'prohibited individuals with physical deformities from visiting public spaces, perpetuating historic conflations of deformity and ugliness'(14), also known as 'unsightly beggar ordinances'.

boundlessness is significantly gendered, as 'depictions of [woman's] excessive flesh crystallize the intimate link between femininity and the body fundamental to medieval constructions of gender' (Howe: 30). These attacks against the moral character of the queen, alongside the general derision of women, are twinned with disparagement of their physical appearance, as Hermione transforms from 'a gross hag'(2.3.108) to 'the sweetest companion'(5.1.11), depending on Leontes' perception of her faithfulness. Throughout the second act of the play, he leads a campaign of disparagement against the disputatious Paulina, describing her as 'that audacious lady'(2.3.42), 'a mankind witch…A most intelligencing bawd'(2.3.67-8), 'thy crone'(2.3.76), and 'thy lewd-tongued wife'(2.3.171). This thesis centres around Ragnelle, who is not a witch necessarily, but is branded with a similar pugnaciousness as Paulina. Moreover, Ragnell's witch-likeness is alluded to, according to some medievalists[15], despite not definitively falling into this category. These accusations of being a witch or a crone, are linked, in *The Winter's Tale* at least, to the way that women's voices are discredited through the association of being ugly: 'Is there any word a woman dreads more?' (Pearlman, cited in Henderson: 48). This word 'ugly', and its medieval forms including 'fowlle', 'grosse' and 'unseemly', I will argue, are retroactively constructed as an attribute or quality of disruption, defiance, and incivility. These constructions, the incitement to negate accepted social order and aesthetic repulsiveness, are manifest in one another; they are dialectically twinned and hypostatised, that is assumed to be universally present, in each another, so that a ugly person is presumed anomalous, dangerous, criminal even, while an outspoken woman is labelled physically undesirable, as an extension of socially undesirable. What I mean by this is that ugly women are deemed difficult and difficult women are deemed ugly, insofar as it becomes a hypostatised condition, presumed to be an essential quality rather than a byproduct of patriarchal ridicule and a means of propagating misogynistic ontologies.

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[15] Henderson writes that 'her mention of 'owlles' links her to witches' and Ragnell's stepmother transforms her through necromancy ([I was] 'shapen by nygramancy' (691:62).

These connections between beauty and morality are extrapolated by Susan Udry in her aforementioned study of late medieval French conduct books; here, she identifies that 'far less attention has been devoted to examining the interrelationship between moral statements in these texts and statements of advice to a woman about caring for her appearance [than to examining misogynistic bodily containment]'(91). In Robert de Blois and Geoffroy IV de la Tour Landry's conduct texts, 'the admixture of moral warning and practical beauty advice'(91) works 'to discipline unruly female body parts'(92). The *Livre du Chevalier de La Tour Landry* and the *Chastoiement des dames* (de Blois) were poetic works of conduct literature that instructed women on how to take care of their appearance, while also staying away from 'the evils of vanity'; they warned women against 'female unchastity', which 'is often mingled with a discourse that sounds more like beauty advice'(91). Udry's study relates to Ragnelle as she shows various iterations of what it meant to be 'marriageable', or to have '"bel mantien" [good carriage] and courtesy'; 'there is no honour or no earthly good that can compare to goodness and to good manners, and especially to humility and to humbleness'(96). For Robert de Blois, this included admonishing women for 'gluttony' and being 'quarrelsome'; he gives 'advice regarding behaviour at meals', which could certainly be applied to Ragnelle's wedding feast in which she eats so much that '[a]lle men then that evere her sawe /Bad the deville her bonys gnawe'[16](616-7.54). This line not only invokes how Ragnell is seen as 'foul and discourteous'(602:53)[17], but also enriches the image of how she eats in an animalistic manner, gnawing on the bones of 'capons' and 'curlues'(610:54). Howe suggests that this scene twins Ragnelle's physical disruption with her disruption of the homosocial order, the 'Arthurian court that considered itself emblematic of all things civilised' (Niebrzydowski: 97):

> This collapse of boundaries between appetites (oral and carnal) speaks to the revealing function of her mouth. Not only does its eroticism externalise femininity's interior carnality, writing sexual as well as oral desire across her toothy grin, but her continuous devouring of flesh forces masculinity to stand witness to its own collapsing borders through the play at castration embedded in these depictions of Dame Ragnell's mouth. (Howe: 47)

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[16] modern English: 'All the men that ever saw her/ Bade the devil to gnaw her bones'.
[17] original: 'foulle and nott curteys'.

Sue Niebryzdowki figures this 'monstrous appetite' as a site of grotesque visual comedy, but for Udry this 'discourse of practical sociability'(95) was concerned with 'feminine beauty as a means of establishing and maintaining smooth social interactions between members of different classes'(95). It is important to note that these conduct manuals distinguish between 'natural' beauty and enhanced beauty, through cosmetics or 'ornamentation'; '[b]y altering their appearance the men and women are figuratively "counterfeiting" or making false copies of themselves'(98), which perverted 'the natural created order by reversing the sex roles of men and women'. This is similar to the disruption of carnal hierarchies that Howe discusses, as figures like Ragnelle presupposed collapse borders and boundaries in the Arthurian homosocial order. Geoffroy's Chevalier condemns the physical augmentation of women's bodies through cosmetics which 'indicates anxieties about the possibility that a woman could upset the order of the sexes simply by altering her appearance'(101). Moreover, it reflected a sexual agency in the desire to attract men that was, of course, interpreted as licentiousness, much in the same way that cosmetics and vanity are inextricably linked in the contemporary cultural moment. Again, physical and moral values are caught in a gendered entanglement, which perpetually diverts agency away from women, as beauty and vanity are held in an antagonistic dialectic, while ugliness and immorality are contentiously twinned. While Ragnell *is* hideous, in every conventional sense of the term, her hideousness means much more than just being viscerally repulsive and unsightly; she, like Shakespeare's Paulina, poses a radical otherness to the court in which she attempts to assimilate. In order to untangle these ideological associations between being socially and aesthetically disruptive, one should first consider the political implications of ugliness as a 'counter-promise' to beauty.

In *The Counter-Promise of Ugliness,* Dave Beech identifies this politicisation of the ugly. He writes that 'the political opposition between beauty and ugliness is not felt as political at all, but as the self-evident, correct and natural affirmation of beauty, and the equally self-evident rejection of ugliness'(7). As ideological subjects, we unquestioningly accept that '[b]eauty is good, ugliness is bad'; these are putatively universal, 'self-evident', civilised and *civilising* truths. This is significant

to the romance genre, in which "the romance body writes interior meaning as corporeality, [and] physical beauty and moral worth are always indistinguishable, just as monstrousness is equally a somatic and ethical state"(Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, q. in Howe: 35). Moreover, beauty is the promise of happiness, a promise which is 'perpetually broken', according to Adorno (Beech: 6). The idealisation of beauty is 'a call to order'(7): to 'speak of beauty in terms of character and ethics is to trade in the promise of happiness for the production of social complicity'. If beauty is the spectre of a utopian, totalising complicity, ugliness is a radical challenge to this ideology. Beech quotes Hutchinson: '[t]he ugly is a trope that threatens to dissolve symbolic distinctions' […] Specifically, ugliness 'contains the threat to destroy art altogether, in the name of that which does not have a proper place''(7).

A theorist who works to reaffirm the sidelined potential of ugliness is Gretchen E. Henderson; 'if ugliness provokes a shift beyond comfort and stasis, it arguably incites change' (12). Henderson's book *Ugliness: A Cultural History* jumps off from Umberto Eco's claim that,

> Beauty is, in some ways, boring. Even if its concept changes through the ages, nevertheless a beautiful object must always follow certain rules . . . Ugliness is unpredictable and offers an infinite range of possibilities. Beauty is finite. (10)

In examining a select handful of these infinite iterations, Henderson conveys how 'ugliness resists static figuration and helps us to re-evaluate our shifting perceptions'; our encounters with ugly things in art and literature 'can suggest that we, as perceiving subjects, might [also] be matters out of place[18]'(13). Henderson continues that '[u]gliness provokes us to re-evaluate cultural borders, including bodies that have been included and excluded, to question our own place in the mix'(13). In her book, Henderson examines a range of 'uncomfortable anomalies'(25), figures who have been labelled ugly and who '[occupy] a tenuous space between the known and the unknown, the understood and the misunderstood, the fit and the misfit, the included and the outcast'(26). In the

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[18] Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger.*

discussion of these figures, from French artist ORLAN to performer Julia Pastrana, Quinten Massys' *Ugly Duchess* to our very own Dame Ragnelle, Henderson identifies the trouble with this discussion of aesthetics:

> Even when otherwise well intended, scholars who write about 'freaks' risk replicating the sideshow [59][…] As I reinscribe the brand of 'ugly' on these individuals, I inadvertently participate in an act of 'othering' that, on the surface, might perpetuate superficial readings, but by playing into that process I hope to trouble my own spectatorship and the act of spectating, which privileges visual cues. [28]

By re-examining ugly bodies as those which exceed aesthetically privileged hierarchies, medievalists can reclaim them as sites of social revolt, both dramatic and subtle, and slough away self-evident 'truths', the broken promises of beauty. For example, Henderson explains how in ancient Egyptian culture, 'deformity' could be considered 'a divine marker', which 'demonstrated an elevated social status… [ugly features] may have served to express 'a radically new concept of kingship and queenship' where 'the ugliness of images is indicative of the intensity behind the new beliefs''(34). She examines a range of cultural moments in which ugliness is depicted; although the 'ugly' features themselves differed and although these features have been revered, derided, or hidden from view, they collectively interact with the idea of social change. Regardless of culture and reception, they push back against statistical norms and disrupt the illusion of ideological beauty; '[f]ears become conflated as if 'aberrancy within the corporeal order is an aberrancy in the social order''(34). Specifically, in the Middle Ages, there was an increasing interest in 'transformation and metamorphosis'(35): 'from werewolves to green men, demons to witches, shape-shifting to body-borrowing, miracles to alchemy'(36), Henderson writes that these unruly bodies 'demarcated' and 'confront[ed] fears about social change'(35-36). She describes grotesque gargoyles and marginalia as 'boundary guarding creatures' (36); while they literally guard boundaries between pages and buildings, they also represent an imaginative transgression into the realm of aberrancy, horror, and aesthetic excess. Mary Leech relates this to the *Sheela-na-gig*[19], writing that while these '[d]eformed

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[19] '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, emphasise

or hideous figures may serve a protective function in a society, [they are] still placed outside the borders of a culture and are viewed as part of the margins they guard against'(216). It would appear that, in spite of the aesthetic economies of beauty which are presented as totalising, aspirational, and ethically compelling, ugliness has a prominent place in art, including literature and architecture. In fact, visual and social aberrancy -and their apparent interrelatedness- may not be so convincingly regarded as 'the obstacle that stands in the way of desire' (Cousins, q. Beech: 6). Umberto Eco celebrates ugliness, writing

> You cannot tell me that some hells were conceived only to terrify the faithful: they were also conceived to give us a hell of a kick. […] Friedrich Schiller wrote in his 1792 essay "On the Tragic Art": It is a phenomenon common to all men, that sad, frightful things, even the horrible, exercise over us an irresistible seduction, and that in the presence of a scene of desolation and of terror we feel at once repelled and attracted by two equal forces. (Eco: Online excerpt from *On the Shoulders of Giants*)

A discussion of the ugly women in medieval literature may first warrant a consideration of beauty, or rather, how beauty in this period is distinct from its modern signification. Mary Carruthers, in *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, considers the medieval aesthetics of beauty. She writes

> 'Ugly' is a word of a different sort, paired now of course always with 'beauty'. But as in the case of 'bitter' with 'sweet', so an examination of sensory or ordinary beauty may profit from considering its opposite. As the Parisian schoolman Alexander of Hales pointed out (c.1235–45), 'good things appear more lovely from being next to bad ones. (176)

This observation calls for an examination into the beauty of the Middle Ages, in order to define its opposite, or rather its ugly step-sister; 'we will not understand ugliness without grasping the hierarchical relation that ties it permanently but unhappily to beauty' (Beech: 6).

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femininity through exaggerated portrayals of female genitalia […] 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 oversized buttocks. […] The emphasis on Dame Ragnell's yellow teeth and boar-like tusks relate to this type of threatening sexual imagery' (216-217).

In 1955, D.S Brewer collated dominant depictions of feminine beauty exhibited in canonical classical and medieval texts, taking portraits from Dares Phrygius[20], Maximian[21], Geoffrey of Vinsauf[22], Benoît de Ste-Maure, Chrestien de Troyes, and descriptions from *Le Roman de la Rose*[23]. Matthew of Vendôme[24]'s portraits of Helen of Troy illustrate this archetype of feminine beauty, in which

> the forehead is like milk, and […] is 'libera'[25]. But there is no difference whatever in the type, or many of the comparisons. Eyes are still like stars, teeth like ivory, the neck like snow, and the lady is still narrow down to the waist, with a swelling belly. (258)

Brewer's article exemplifies the dominance of feminine beauty ideals through the consistent tropes of these portraits, such as the emphasis on 'yellow' or 'golden hair', white, unblemished skin, and 'snow, lilies, stars, [and] crystal, [which] are the terms of comparison'(258). In these medieval portraits, the most popular aspects of feminine beauty are fair hair, dark eyebrows, a 'slender waist' (262), grey eyes, and skin 'like snow', but often includes other traits such as a cloven chin, a slim waist and a long neck. However, Brewer writes that although 'conventionally is it beauty that first arouses the hero's love… love itself surrounds her beauty with a special radiance, gives it a special delight and power…. [through this] her physical beauty often becomes a reflexion [sic] of moral beauty'(262), as the heroine's virtue inspires virtue in her lover. Additionally, Brewer rejects the assumption that medieval portraits were written to be 'realistic' or accurate representations of real life, which, 'for a medieval writer […] would be beside the point'(264). Rather, medieval writers

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[20] '[Polyxena and Briseida] are each candida with yellow hair (flavis), and each is clearly of the same general appearance; though Polyxena is tall, while Briseida is 'not tall' and has the joined eyebrows which were a mark of beauty to the Greeks.' (Brewer: 257)

[21] ''Milky' whiteness; the golden hair contrasting strikingly with the black eyebrows'. (Brewer: 258)

[22] 'the same type-golden hair, black eyebrows, white skin, long neck (a column), long arms, long thin milk-white fingers, very small waist, very short foot. Snow, lilies, stars, crystal, are the terms of comparison.' (Brewer: 258)

[23] '[Idleness' description] Her hair is yellow, her eyebrows curved and sleek, her eyes grey - as falcon this time- her complexion white and red, mouth small, chin cloven, (perhaps the earliest occurrence of this popular feature)-in a word, she is of the usual type. […] [Beauty is] as bright as moonlight, her flesh tender, face lily and rose, she is slim and her hair is yellow and reaches to her heels. All her body is well wrought. Guillaume says she is not made up. Chaucer adds furthermore that she does not pluck her eyebrows (Brewer: 258).

[24] 'In the first example her hair is golden, forehead white as paper, eyebrows black and thin. The space between the eyes [… is] a 'milky way'; the face is a shining star; the eyes are like stars. She has a little smile, a nose neither too big nor too small. Her face is rosy, her colouring white and red, like rose and snow. Teeth are like ivory, lips are small, slightly swelling, honeyed. Her mouth smells like a rose, her neck is smooth, shoulders radiant, well-spaced (dispatiati), breasts small, and figure incomparable.[…]The skin of her hands is smooth, not slack, her legs fleshy (or white), her foot short and toes straight.' (Brewer: 258)

[25] 'free', here meaning unblemished. (https://latin-dictionary.net/search/latin/libera)

often play on the conventions of 'ideal' feminine beauty. For example, Brewer writes about Duchess Blanche in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*:

> Such girls, in medieval literature at least, represent not realistic individuals, unique, never to be met with again, […] they represent universals in concrete form… The convention both formulates and releases that 'stock response', the deliberate organisation of the mind and feelings which has been described as 'one of the first necessities of human life'. (267)

Brewer says that these conventions correspond to a 'basic element in man's experience', so that a writer may only need to 'touch on an essential detail or two to suggest the whole'(267), that whole being the ideal feminine form, accompanied by all its moral associations and elevations. The idea of 'stock responses' as a necessity of human life is informed by C.S Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost,* in which he purports that these responses occur when writers use 'language to control what already exists in our minds'(53), calling forth the whole, or the 'universal' representation, in order to elicit a 'deliberately organised attitude'(55). Universal, however, is a relative concept; nothing can be universal in that nothing is totalising, homogenising, or can reach into every corner of aesthetic representation. These so-called universals, therefore, rather invoke a wide but undeniably limited canon of beauty in literature. These medieval portraits of feminine beauty are enmeshed in a web of specific signifiers; they suspend the 'eternal flux' (direct free play) of mere immediate experience'(55) and defer to a universalised –or *universalizing*– mythology of the feminine ideal. Here I am choosing to refer to them as universalising principles, in that they present themselves as transcendental, that is outside of cultural signifiers, while actually invoking such signifiers through their hypostasisation. Additionally, 'feminine ideal' is a slippery term, not only because it is a personal negotiation, but also because medieval ideals are not the same as contemporary aesthetic values, despite the fact that there may be superficial parallels between them. While in a contemporary capitalistic system, it could be said that beauty is entrenched in the material, the desirability and profitability of a person, medieval beauty could be said to abstract the feminine ideal from materiality itself. Brewer says that 'the early heroine is not an equal, not a mate. She is above her worshippers and yet, in a sense, because she is passive and needs protection, she is inferior to them' (Brewer: 269).

These portraits and their stock responses, therefore, symbolically dismember the heroine, and commit her to a universal ideal. By limiting their narrative presence to the hegemonic ideal of beauty, these medieval heroines are constructed in a position of gender inferiority, suspended between realms of 'real' and symbolic, as they *personify* these idealised virtues rather that championing them as a component of their characterisation.

While the representation of feminine beauty in medieval lyrics can be glimpsed through these universalising tropes, 'the grotesque', on the other hand, 'does not inhabit a stable or predetermined ground', nor 'does it provide a simple measure for prearranged decision-making about literature and aesthetics' (4: Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*). In *The Fair Maid of Ribblesdale* lyrics, Brewer says the lady's portrait 'has a certain grotesque charm' in the comparison of her neck to a swan's, 'a nice example of unrealistic idealisation [in the Elizabethan period]'(260). In accordance with a given 'stock response', the swan's neck implies not only that the Fair Maid's throat is slender and pale, but also endows her with the qualities of elegance and musicality[26] associated with swans in this period. However, given that the stock response can never fully totalise a reader's interpretation, other possible 'responses', or affective interpretations ensue from such a choice metaphor; this may include invoking the image of a woman with distended and exaggerated features which skirts the boundaries between a hyperbolic feminine ideal and the grotesque. Edwards and Graulund write that the grotesque 'acknowledges the possibilities of an open structure in which there can be no certainty, no exclusive or permanent state of something which does not already contain within it something else: there is no beauty without ugliness, [and] no comedy with tragedy'(3: Edwards and Graulund). In practice, therefore, this swans-neck association may simultaneously invoke beauty *and* grotesquerie. Edwards and Graulund write that the grotesque 'challenge[s] absolute authority' and questions the 'aesthetic measure' that equates outward beauty with moral efficacy and virtue. The grotesque 'does

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[26] According to the Medieval Bestiary Online (http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast237.htm): The swan's general attributes: 'The swan has a harmonious voice, with which it pours out a sweet song. […] The long neck of the swan makes its song more pleasant. The song it sings before it dies is the sweetest of all. Sailors consider the sighting of a swan to be auspicious.'

not inhabit a stable or predetermined ground', like the network of associations that underpin Lewis' idea of stock responses; in fact, it thrives on the 'discombobulating juxtapositions and bizarre combinations' found in art and literature. Leech suggests that through Ragnelle's grotesqueness, she 'challenges norms and reveals fears'; '[w]ith her body in a state of continual fluctuation and formation, she acts a regenerative signifier for the problem within the social structure that are also in a process of continual flux reformation'(Howe:222). The grotesque is not simply a dialectical component of the 'conventional oppositions' of 'refined/foul', 'high/low', but a 'boundary phenomenon of hybridisation or inmixing, in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone' (Stallybrass and White, quoted by Edwards and Graulund: 6). In fact, Edwards and Graulund say that the grotesque 'can criticise the idea that there is some ethically compelling aspect to 'normality' by suggesting that the normal range is simply a statistical category to which there is no ethical obligation to correspond'(10). That is to say, the grotesque introduces a radical alterity not only to the aesthetic construction of medieval romance, but also to the fundamental presuppositions about femininity that have been attributed to medieval heroines in critical theory of the past century.

Patrizia Bettella's book *The Ugly Woman* (2005) examines transgressive aesthetic models in poetry from the Middle Ages, specifically focusing on Italian poetry. However, much of her insights into the Loathly Lady trope can be applied to British medieval writing, particularly what she says about the representation of grotesque female bodies in this period. In her book, Bettella's discussion of medieval beauty reflects many of the classical concepts that Brewer explores; '[in medieval and early modern literature] beauty is harmony, perfection, decorum, fruition of divine love, *ultimately truth*...'(5, emphasis added). Although it is undeniable that the canon of medieval heroines frequently appear to exhibit the features that Brewer writes about, these physical tropes themselves propagate the entrenchment of abstract qualities, such as harmony, elegance, and refinement; through the presumed response, the physical aspect is, supposedly, indicative of the ethical quality of such figures.

In contrast, although perhaps not in opposition, ugly hags 'contravene the rules of proportion and perfection glorified in the refined environment of Renaissance courts and do not conform to the dictates of decorum, elegance, and cleanliness' (6). Before her wedding night, Ragnell certainly disregards these dictates in favour of being a demanding, audacious, and coarse figure in the romance. Sue Niebryzdowski affirms this, writing that with 'her excessive size and inability to observe etiquette […], Dame Ragnell is an embodiment of the Bakhtinian 'grotesque': the body that is uncontained, unruly, uncontrolled by notions of propriety and good manners, and thus is animalistic' (Niebrzydowski). Moreover, Bettella proposes that 'women in the comic and parodistic texts examined are merely objects of male representation, and as such they can hardly be said to take up an active subject positions; they are objectified as much as their beautiful counterparts'(4). By equating the objectification of both conventionally ugly and attractive women, this claim operates along a spectrum upon which all medieval feminine figures can be placed somewhere between the antipodes of beautiful and grotesque. In doing so, this view ignores the cultural impact of race, class, and age. This is not to say that Bettella does not consider these aspects in her thorough and convincing argument; however, the claim that ugly women 'are objectified as much as their beautiful counterparts' fails to invoke the complicity of women in an aesthetically privileged hierarchy. Alternately, assigning such passivity to medieval heroines and hags may work to elide both their agential self-awareness and navigation of their political underrepresentation. Either way, it places far too much power in the hands of the supposedly male writers of these romances and negates the transgressive potential of a feminine aesthetic type that extends beyond artistic intention. Of course, Ragnelle is not simply an ugly woman, but a loathly lady, in that she transforms from being 'so fowlle a creature'(249:22) into 'the fayrest creature' (641:55), a superlative parallel and a dynamic metamorphosis through which, I will argue, Ragnell occupies an 'active subject position' and radically dissolves the singularity of male representation in medieval romance narratives.

Beauty is a call to order; ugliness, impoliteness, and visual humour work to actively resist such ideological demands. Impoliteness and ugliness alike resist the static categorisations that beauty

and politeness must submit to; Ragnelle's ill manners reflect the imaginative transgression of societal conventions, which allow her to renegotiate the politicisation of politeness for herself and her status. When beauty is revered as an instrument of civilised and civilising society, impoliteness becomes a radical counterpoint to homogeneity. Ragnelle's ugliness, manifest through her impoliteness, unrefined comportment, and animalistic table manners, is highly political. Her impoliteness and ugliness defer from the universalising and civilising apparatus of chivalric conduct as a supposed indicator of moral worth. Instead, the physical collapsing and blurring of borders is indicative of the collapsing of presupposed social, hierarchical, and gender boundaries. Moreover, it compels the Arthurian court to abide by their chivalric code no matter how abhorrent Ragnelle is and it is through these boundaries that her transgressive power is exerted over chivalric society.

Chapter 2

Politics, Politeness, and Primogeniture: Identity and Legal Status in *The Wedding of Sir*

Gawain and Dame Ragnelle

'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' (Leech: 215).

Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* in the 7th century 'melds femininity with the body'; his 'configuration of woman is based upon etymology [which] testifies to the essentialism of this gendered state. The relationship between women and corporeality, Isidore seems to suggest, is so natural that the very words used to speak of her engender this connection' (Howe: 33). Isidore's idea of medieval gender expression as dichotomous and essentialist fails to invoke the literature and legal texts which indicate the contrary, such as the figure of the loathly lady who, according to Howe, 'unsettles and even deconstructs stable ideological boundaries, particularly concerning traditional gender codes'(51). This chapter will examine how gender is highly political, negotiable, fluid, and contingent in *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. In the Middle Ages, women's political and legal positions as maidens, wives, or widows informed their gender expression, and vice versa. In the case of Ragnell, her gender and status in the narrative are contingent upon how her behaviour is deemed by the court, be that foul or honourable. For this reason, the public opinion on her politeness, her courtliness, is deeply interconnected with her womanliness, beastliness, and her legal status.

Carol Lansing's article *Conflicts Over Gender in Civic Courts* studies cases of sexual violence in medieval Italy; although not directly applicable to British medieval literature, Lansing's work can demonstrate the negotiation of gender as a legal and parochial construct. Despite the fact that common law was widely favoured over Roman law in medieval Britain, this study is critical in illustrating, firstly, the containment of women's agency as property belonging to their male guardian, and

secondly, women's subterfuge in circumventing misogyny in legal doctrine. Moreover, through such doctrine, feminine politeness undergoes a political transformation, transcending a parochial realm and entering into legal significance. Lansing writes that '[o]ne of the places where medieval people actively used gender categories to construct or debate identity was civic courts'(118);

> These legal norms were based on long-standing assumptions about men and women, including limited female capacity and the sexual double standard. However, the complex requirements for proof in Roman law also opened up the possibility of debate over gender norms. Partial proof could be based on *fama*, that is, reputation and status. Witnesses testifying to *fama* discussed what aspects of behaviour determined a person's status, which could become an implicit debate over gender expectations. (118-9)

A woman's *fama* could determine the putative legitimacy of her testimony, be that defence or accusation, in a civic Italian court in the twelfth century. Lansing writes that '[f]ama could refer to reputation in the streets[…] [b]ad *fama* might mean reputation or the local gossip[…] [and w]itness testimony might be about public *fama* (reputation), but it also could be eyewitness reports of behaviour that indicated status'(125). This negotiation of status directly affected the punishment (or lack thereof) of perpetrators of sexual violence in Bolognese civic courts; in many cases 'the damage to a woman's reputation could outweigh the satisfactions of justice'(121) and in cases of abduction, 'there is no evidence that the families sought the return of the dishonoured women'(123). In Lansing's case study, a bourgeois man called Nicolao was accused of raping a woman called Tomasina, who was an *'amasia*, a common but murky social category best translated as concubine or lover' (126). Some medieval women lived as wives, 'in bed and at table'(126), but could not legally marry given that they lacked dowries. Once 'Nicolao confessed to premeditated forcible carnal knowledge, the case hinged not on his actions but on gender norms, putting the focus on Tomasina's character', given that a 'victim of a rape had to be an honest woman, a woman of good legal standing'(124). In spite of the apparent classist misogyny of this system, these witness testimonies also meant that the public could push back against established legal procedures, such as those that stated that only an *honesta* could be a victim of rape; not every medieval subject accepted 'the dichotomous view of female identity based on sexual behavior'(127). Nicolao's defence stated that 'Tomasina [was] a woman of vile condition and dishonest life, and [had] been vile and inhonesta in the neighborhood for many

years'(127). Nicolao's witnesses disparaged Tomasina's reputation, by 'playing on contemporary attitudes about female honour', which included saying that 'she had a sharp tongue'(127). Lansing importantly notes that 'the attitudes about rape victims that existed in the thirteenth century persist into the twenty-first: a rape case can still fail because of perceived doubts about the victim's morality that have nothing to do with the evidence in the case'(129). This tangent into a discussion of sexual violence laws in the Middle Ages can inform *the Wedding* by going some way to explaining the literary representation of gender in this period. The case of Tomasina, and whether she was an *honesta*, an *amasia*, or both, demonstrate that her gender and legal status are entangled in public perception and opinion.

While I aim to discuss the significance of publicity further in the next chapter, it is here important to note that Lansing's study reveals why gender in *the Wedding* is depicted as constructed and fluid. This chapter will examine Ragnell's negotiation of primogeniture and her political status in the poem; by making a nuisance of herself and demanding her rights, she both exceeds and reinforces her identity as 'woman'. In a medieval gender economy, women were encouraged to be docile, submissive, and attractive in order to be marriageable. Without this quality, their access to inheritance rights was widely limited, which is manifest in *the Wedding* through the recuperation of property. In many ways, women *were* property, as assets that belonged to the male head of the family; 'the daughter never had authority over her apportioned lands; the lands and the daughter were transferred simultaneously from the authority of the father to that of the husband'(Forste-Grupp: 117). This is demonstrated in the punishment of sexual violence in the medieval period; the crime of rape in medieval Europe was labelled either as *stuprum* or *raptus*. On this point, Lansing writes that

> Medieval laws on rape were heavily influenced by Roman law. The legal terms commonly used in Italian civic statutes were *stuprum*, which literally meant to debauch or defile, and *raptus*, a term that in late Roman law had meant abduction and rape, but by the thirteenth century could simply mean abduction. (121)

The term *raptus* implies, therefore, a theft; this meaning of the term was often used, as the defilement of the victim was interpreted as a theft of property from her father, husband, or brother— whoever was legally responsible for her. Ragnell's primogeniture, as discussed by Forste-Grupp, therefore,

poses a radical challenge, not only to the established power in primogeniture, but also to the accepted idea that women were not, or *are not*, political agents. Keeping this historical understanding of women as property in mind, I aim to unpack *the Wedding* as a recuperation of both inheritance and, to a lesser extent, political agency for Ragnelle.

In *the Weddynge*, Ragnelle's desire for powers both social and sexual are bound together through double entendre. For example, in recounting what women most desire to Sir Gromer Somer Joure, Arthur says their 'sovereynté'(468:41) means '[t]o have the rewlle of the manlyest men'(470:41), or 'to have the control of the manliest men'[27] as a direct translation into modern English. This may be read in one of two ways; either, feminine sovereignty is to have same control *as* the manliest of men -over their own lives, socially and legally-, or it is to have control *over* the manliest of men 'in bowre and in bed'[28](401:35), that is, sexually. Chaucer's rendition of the loathly lady tale extrapolates this ambiguity. The Wife of Bath's hag tells her betrothed knight that

> Wommen desire to have sovereyntee
> As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,
> And for to been in maistrie hym above. (1038-40)

Plainly, this suggests that the 'thyng that worldly wommen loven best' is mastery and sovereignty over their husbands; that is, to be in control of them. This interpretation is heightened by the queen, only a few lines down, being referred to as 'my sovereyn lady', denoting the monarch's political sway as a symbol of such feminine sovereignty. However, within the context of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Prologue*, the line is endowed with alternative meanings. The emphasis on being 'over' and 'above' one's husband creates a visual hierarchy, in addition to a social one. Marylinn Desmond discusses the significance of the 'mounted Aristotle'[29] trope in relation to the Wife of Bath,

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[27] 'rewlle' translated to 'control' by Thomas Hahn.

[28] In modern English: 'And your desire you shall have/In chamber and bed' (400-401:35).

[29] 'More than one hundred examples of the "mounted Aristotle" survive from the medieval period, and the image appears with similar frequency throughout the early modern era. […] An old man, usually identified as aged and learned by his hair and dress, crawls along the ground on his hands and knees. On his back sits a woman who "rides" him; these images visualise the woman's erotic agency by a whip or rod that she holds aloft in one hand. (14-15)'
'[Susan] Smith suggests that Aristotle's performance as a horse is a "metaphor" for sexual intercourse, and she reads the "mounted Aristotle" as an inversion of the ecclesiastically sanctioned positions for heterosexual intercourse.'(19)

extrapolating women's sovereignty in the text to reflect anxiety about feminine sexual dominance. Locating this allegory in the equestrian imagery and language applied to Alisoun of Bath, Desmond writes that '[t]his metaphorical depiction of the Wife derives from the textual and visual tradition of the "mounted Aristotle," an exemplum that expresses the scandalous possibilities in the erotics of sexual difference'(13). These inversion of the 'cultural norm that considered the husband to be the dominant partner in a marriage' (126) further entangles the threat of women's sovereignty, socially and sexually, with the weakening of the homosocial chivalric order. In *the Wedding*, Arthur further complicates this distinction in his next line by saying 'thus they me dyd ken /To rule the, Gromer Syre'[30](471-2:41), the repetition of 'rule' emasculating his opponent by taking on the meaning of sexual dominance, sexing the political hierarchy that he holds over Sir Gromer. Additionally, this line contributes to the theme of primogeniture in the romance, as feminine sovereignty would contend with the misogyny of medieval inheritance law; according to Sheryl L. Fortse-Grupp 'the poem's overall objective [is] criticising aristocratic behaviour and suggesting that the social hierarchy of hereditary title and lands is unredeemably antiquated'(105). It is also interesting to note that Arthur says that 'they', women, told him the answer to Sir Gromer's question, when in actuality, his questioning of a multitude of women was a fruitless endeavour; it was Ragnelle's answer alone that saved Arthur's life. In purporting that the women taught him this simply to overpower Sir Gromer, Arthur tries to erase Ragnelle's agency from the conversation, and in doing so, erase the demands and control that Ragnelle exacts over both him and Gawain, calling back to both interpretations of her control over/of men. While Arthur does commend Ragnelle's actions at the end of the romance after she transforms, at this point she is elided from the narrative. Sir Gromer, however, instantly curses his sister to 'bren on a fyre'[31](473:41), knowing that only Ragnell could've ruined his plan to kill Arthur. Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp writes that the naming of Ragnell in this specific romance significantly distinguishes it from the analogous loathly lady romances, 'Gower's *Tale of*

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[30] 'Thus they [women] did teach me/ To rule you, Sir Gromer'.
[31] 'burn on a fire'.

Florent, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and the anonymous *Marriage of Sir Gawain*'(106) in which the 'hideous hag' remains nameless. Forste-Grupp relates this to the commentary on primogeniture underlying *the Wedding*:

> [In the analogues], [h]er lack of identity proclaims her to be of no significance in comparison to the named males who contract social alliances by aligning the unnamed hag with their patriarchal families and feudal bonds. By naming the hag "Ragnell" and bestowing upon her the honorific title "dame", the poet of *The Weddynge* refuses to allow the reader or audience to consign her to the faceless group of other unnamed heiresses married for their dowers and family connections instead of themselves. (Forste-Grupp: 106).

One of the ways in which Ragnell is rude or outspoken is that she continually demands this visibility in the romance; by invoking her inheritance rights and circumventing misogynistic law, Ragnelle disturbs established legal doctrine, which manifests itself in both homosocial hierarchies and feminine social docility. Forste-Grupp explains how the lands that Ragnell secures through her marriage were implicitly lands dispossessed from her brother, Sir Gromer Somer Joure, and granted to Gawain:

> This apparently innocent request on Ragnell's part to marry Gawain becomes quite intriguing in the context of her sibling relationship with Gromer and Gawain's *seisin*[32] of the lands which her brother claims are his. The rancor between Sir Gromer Somer Joure and Dame Ragnell actually might derive from competition for their family lands, possession of which would integrate one of them to court society and would confer upon one title, status, authority and wealth. (115)

Thus, Ragnell 'outmanoeuvres' Sir Gromer in order to reinsert herself into a society that has marginalised her. This relates to a discussion of female impoliteness, because primogeniture and homosocial land laws create an environment in which the female figures in medieval romance are reliant on their male associates for social status and security; in other words, they have to be eligible, marriageable, and docile in order to access rights that would otherwise be available to them if they were men. These strictures of docility are complicated by Ragnell in that she does not conform and yet still obtains her assets through her marriage to Gawain. 'Like many other female protagonists of medieval romances,' Forste-Grupp explains, 'Ragnell must work by subterfuge and subtlety, using verbal skill and secret knowledge, to wrest for herself an assured and safe existence'(118). Forste-

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[32] 'Seisin may be defined most simply as the possession or holding of lands from a lord to whom the seized person gives homage, pays fee, and renders military'. (Forste-Grupp: 107)

Grupp's ideas beg the question, is feminine coarseness necessarily mutually exclusive from such powers of 'subterfuge and subtlety', or rather, does feminine subterfuge necessarily rely on apparent complicity? Forste Grupp continues:

> Dame Ragnell is marginalised by her loathsome appearance which makes her an undesirable wife; however, that very same repulsiveness might be an asset when she competes with her brother for the family fief, because her appearance frees her from medieval strictures regarding female behaviour -silence, modesty, humility- and female enclosures –hearth, hall, garden. (115)

Through this, Ragnell challenges the legal status of her gender. Forste-Grupp notes how this claim to her rights culminates in Ragnell's 'assimilation into the male, patriarchal culture' through her 'transformation from an ugly, articulate, independent woman into a beautiful, deferential, obedient wife'(121). In exceeding her legal capacity, therefore, Ragnell is permitted to enter into court on the terms that she abides by conventional categorisation. Moreover, she produces a male heir, Gyngolen, who is psychoanalytically labelled as Ragnell's 'phallus' by Forste-Grupp, and who's birth facilitates 'the romance [to end] in harmony with the outsiders woven into the fabric of an idealised society'(111). According to Forste-Grupp, Ragnell's apparent assimilation is a disappointing ending to the romance, in which she 'relinquishes her newly won sovereignty over Gawain and her family's lands, thereby winning her husband's love and thus becoming a conventional heroine of medieval romance-silent, passive, and beautiful'(118). Only through circumventing primogeniture laws does Ragnell achieve 'a small, significant victory'(122). Forste-Grupp's conclusion presents the condition of submissive womanhood as inevitable and imminent in medieval romance, even for the likes of a dynamically unscrupulous and comically cantankerous hag like Ragnelle.

However, this cynical interpretation overlooks the varied expressions of gender present in *the Wedding*, given that attempts to subjugate women and make gender static and self-evident often demarcate spaces of resistance and tension. For example, in Tara William's *Inventing Womanhood*, she examines Gower's *Tale of Florent*, an analogue to *The Wedding of Dame Ragnell and Sir Gawain*. In this, she posits that medieval literature produces gender and identity externally and performatively, locating such negotiation in the depiction of Ragnelle. The political manifestation of gender in the

romance is not contained within the binaries of man-woman, one being powerful and the second being ultimately powerless without the orchestration of the first. Rather, Ragnell and her impoliteness counter the entrenchment of binary hierarchies in the romance by posing an alterity of her haggishness; implicitly feminine yet beastly, potentially magical, decidedly unrefined, and overtly disruptive. In her discussion of 'manhood', 'womanhood', and 'beastliness', Williams says that Gower 'imagines all three identities to be characterised by observable signifiers; as a result, any given identity is not only subject to change, but also can be learned or feigned… [as] identities that are similarly produced and rendered recognisable'(51). Gower's literary figures 'combine elements of manhood, womanhood, and beastliness… The loathly lady in the *Tale of Florent*, for example, is somewhere between a woman and a monster'(52). This can be similarly observed in the *Weddynge*, not only through Ragnell's beastliness as a hag, but also during the liminal time in which she waits on Gawain's answer to grant her 'sovereynté'(695:62), as a conventionally beautiful woman. Upon seeing her transformed, Gawain asks Ragnell, the 'fayrest creature'(641:57), "Whate ar ye?"(644:58), opposed to perhaps a more polite question, 'who are you?' In this moment, despite her looks, Ragnell's status in the romance is not yet human, nor is it beast. Rather she is a beautiful 'creature'; Gawain is more shocked by this version of Ragnell than by her hag form[33], as this instantaneous transformation pushes her further into the semiotically inconceivable. To clarify, as a hag, her grotesqueness *is* socially disruptive; however, her superlative dualism in this moment, between the most hideous and then most beautiful creature, radically counters the 'observable signifiers' of status established in the first part of the romance, by bringing polarised feminine identities into proximity. Through this, *The Wedding* undeniably questions assumptions about identity as singular and self-evident. Williams continues,

> these characters demonstrate that identities are both unstable and overlapping…By drawing on Ovidian and other classical traditions in which beastliness often takes the shape of an exaggerated femaleness, Gower reveals the parallel status of womanhood and the monstrous as categories based on the assumption that the exterior represents the interior, [and] he puts this assumption in question for both. (53-4).

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[33] 'Gawain seems more stunned by her sudden transformation into a beauty than he was by her former ugliness, which he now acknowledges for the first time' (Feinstein: 39).

Interestingly, Williams notes how the loathly lady is not only a site of repulsion, not a singularly superficial entity, but one that also draws into contact incongruous and presumably incompatible attributes, a characteristic of the grotesque. She writes that although 'the mixture of the beauty and the womanly in her nature repels him, it also compels him: as a knight, he is bound to be chivalrous'(56). '[O]n the brink of consummation,' Williams continues, 'at the very moment where the disjunction between her womanhood and her beastliness seem irreconcilable, Genius firmly resolves it'(57). This dualism of repulsion-compulsion present in the loathly lady figure is also discussed by Bettella in *The Ugly Woman* with regard to Italian medieval literature. In her introduction, she writes

> Paradoxical exaltations of peasant beauty […] are highly ambiguous, since they manifest the poets' opposing feelings of attraction and repulsion towards the female Other […] Scorn for the peasant and her non-canonical beauty allows the elite to reaffirm their aesthetic and cultural supremacy. (Bettella: 7)

This can be similarly applied to *the Wedding*, in how the Arthurian court homogenises Ragnell's unruly body, rewriting her aesthetic surface to comply with its configurations of what it means to be 'a gentilwoman'(798). In spite of the scorn for Ragnell's grotesque looks, however, the conjunction of apparently oppositional responses of attraction and repulsion, that 'irresistible seduction'(Schiller, q. in Eco) of horror, simultaneously affirms the recalcitrance of her haggishness. Ragnell's deferral of her 'loathsome appearance' (116: Forste-Grupp) in favour of safety and security permits 'the elite'(7: Bettella) to be reaffirmed only insofar as the Other is inevitably incorporated into such an elite. Even invisibly, the recalcitrant spectre of Ragnelle's monstrousness persists, and is culturally and biologically (through Gyngolen) enmeshed into the courtly society. Henderson examines this attraction-repulsion dialectic. She writes that '[t]he inhuman is, then, the otherness that always inhabits the human from the inside. This otherness cannot be accounted for or rationalised, or in any way reassimilated into ordinary life, though it is a permanent part of that ordinary life' (87).

Bettella expands this dialectical complication by positing that the Baroque period of poetry in Italy gave rise to new perspectives of feminine beauty, and promoted 'new aesthetic values, where ugliness no longer figures as an absolute category in sharp opposition to beauty'(129); the 'desire to

elude the illustrious conventions of the love lyric leads to a subversion of the ideal representation of woman, […] which can disarrange the perfect order of female beauty sanctioned in the Renaissance'(130). It is convenient to situate the Middle Ages as culturally subservient to the Baroque and Renaissance, given the ideas of unenlightened peasantry and religious fanaticism now associated with the term 'medieval'. However, Williams' close reading of Gower would suggest that tropes considered incongruous and irreconcilable within the feminine ideal are not peculiar to the Baroque. Rather, it is a misleading to assume that the loathly lady acquires complexity and dynamic potential as time progresses, her power vested in the contingent and cumulative process of revising poetic tropes. This assumption also foreshadows a contemporary future in which beauty and ugliness are entirely incorporated, in addition to prefiguring a past in which there was a whole, perfect feminine ideal, derived from the classical Petrarchan figure. It figures a future of gender that is entirely dispersed, deconstructed, and aesthetically elided, and upholds the past as the dichotomous origin of the sexes.

Although temporal structures will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, for the sake of this exploration of gender and legality, it is important to note that the hierarchies of time and gender are not only comparable, but also deeply connected. Medievalist Liz Herbert McAvoy succinctly conveys this, writing that 'even within a postmodern intellectual culture that actively endeavours to problematise such temporal divides, time as a organising, linear 'progress' from the medieval *then* to the here and *now* (with the *now* being infinitely more enlightened and progressive than the *then*) continues to be adopted as a means of articulating an inexorable 'flow' of historical activity'(2)'. While I agree with Bettella's analysis of the Italian Baroque tropes surrounding unconventional beauty, depictions of womanhood and beauty in medieval British literature were also radically transformative and involved 'a complex diachronic process that incorporated a wide set of usages and influences and that involved innovation at the level of both language and literary representation'(Williams: 3). Williams goes as far as to suggest that medieval women 'invented womanhood, since their actions push the cultural boundaries that historical forces had begun to

destabilise' (10). As can be examined in *the Wedding*, gender identities in the Middle Ages were slippery; attempts to bring them to light in courtly settings only encouraged their evasion and resistance to formal and aesthetic classification. Ragnell's loathly lady identity, in particular, is one characterised by multiplicity and transformation, inherently unstable and inspiring both shock and awe in the other characters. This ambivalence is shown in Ragnell's speech, which is often ambiguous and contradictory when talking to Arthur in the first half of the poem. She says, 'I highte Dame Ragnelle, truly, /That nevere yett begylyd man'[34](319-20). Hahn translates 'begylyd' as 'deceived', but this line can be interpreted in multiple ways. Earnestly, Ragnell may be pledging her honest intentions to the King. However, such as claim is not strictly true, as her identity itself is beguiling and she withholds the truth from both Gawain and Arthur until she obtains her status as a beautiful wife to an esteemed knight. Ragnell's behaviour, be that foul or honourable –or even simultaneously both in her rescuing of Arthur– negotiates her gendered and political agency within the romance, negating static and self-evident understandings of identity, in favour of mediating ambivalence and negotiating sexual politics.

The internal hierarchisation of gendered categories, such as the assumption that women who behave in accordance with specific behavioural rules are deserving of legal protections, is not in any way exclusive to medieval romance. However, the entanglement of gender, legal standing, and public perception implicate the politics of politeness in the instability and negotiability of Ragnelle's ambivalent social and physical identity. This entanglement suggests that Ragnelle is exempt from the same regulatory standards as polite women, as her unrefined and discourteous behaviour permit her to circumvent her legally sanctioned abilities. The fact that Ragnelle's negotiation is predicated on her submission to the conventions of the Arthurian order does not negate the traces of recalcitrance she leaves in her wake. Unlike her analogous hag sisters, Ragnelle luxuriates in her uncivilised, grotesque, and gluttonous behaviour, opting to not take the path of least resistance, but instead a path that resists formal categorisation. By throwing gender polarisations into questions, Ragnelle's

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[34] 'I am named Dame Ragnell, /Who has never yet deceived a man'

submission subtly unpicks the fortitude of the homosocial bond between Gawain and Arthur, vesting

for herself not only her property, but also sway over the very integrity of the court itself.

Chapter 3

Untimeliness: Politeness and Punctiliousness in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

The Loathly Lady has long been associated with misogynistic discourses, as a figure of mockery and a spectacle of ugliness. Sue Niebrzydowski explores the comic potential of Ragnelle in *the Wedding*, citing her appetite as a source of visual comedy for a medieval audience. She suggests that Ragnelle's lustful eating is a site of both discomfort and amusement for a medieval court, who disparage the loathly lady, writing that she has an 'inability to observe etiquette… [Ragnelle] is uncontained, unruly, uncontrolled by notions of propriety and good manners, and thus is animalistic'(97). Bettella follows a similar thread in her book *The Ugly Woman*, writing that

> the male writer performs on the feminine literary bodies his rhetorical, misogynistic, and paradoxical experiments. Ugly bodies, unfit to provide male gratification become loci of fierce attack and denigration or a source of scorn and paradoxical praise. (5)

This chapter aims to sustain that Ragnell possesses the power to speak back to both these gendered attacks and also to the assumption that she is *unable* to conform; inasmuch as Ragnell's tale permits the court to assert itself as socially dominant, her assimilation into the court relies on her awareness of such strictures of etiquette and, in turn, her active choice to negate these. To suggest that Ragnell *cannot*, rather than *will not*, abide by such social rules is to overlook the active subject position that she takes up, which distinguishes *the Wedding* from its analogues[35]. This chapter will argue that the loathly lady reflects the power of the Ageing Woman, alongside anxieties about subversive forms of femininity, born out of cultural and demographic changes in the Middle Ages, which potentially prefigure the contemporary capitalistic denigration of older women. Moreover, it will examine the connections between the politicisation of temporality and politeness; Ragnelle's disruption of the binary temporalities heightens her radical recalcitrance in opposition to conventions of civilised, or *civilising*, behaviour. Temporality is central to a discussion of Ragnelle's conduct, as either courtly

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[35] These analogues include Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Gower's *Tale of Florent*, and the anonymous romance *the Marriage of Sir Gawain*.

or unrefined, because, in the poem, timeliness is entrenched in ideas of punctiliousness; either upholding or negating strictures of time, Ragnell navigates the setting through her relationship to temporality. While Ragnell's age is never explicitly stated, and critics such as Niebrzydowski have argued that she retains a youthfulness even in her hag form, it is undeniable that age and time, or rather her *untimeliness*[36], radically disrupt the courtly setting established in the romance. A central idea of this chapter derives from Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp's claim that '[Ragnelle's] repulsiveness might be an asset when she competes with her brother for the family fief, because her appearance frees her from medieval strictures regarding female behaviour- silence, modesty, [and] humility'(115-6). In spite of the ridicule of the court, Ragnell possesses the power to respond to a culture that marginalises her for her physical appearance; she uses her power as Other to radically dissolve the accepted ideas of what a courtly wife should look like in this period, not only for a medieval audience, but a contemporary one, too.

This discussion of the power of old age does beg questions about whether Ragnell *is* old; of course, the poem presents her post-transformation form as the putative original from which she is 'defoylyd[37]'(710:63) and 'disformyd[38]'(699:62), but in addition to this, many critics have questioned whether Ragnell's hideousness is directly associated with age. This discussion also necessitates a conversation about the meanings of old age in the Middle Ages, divorced from the neomedievalist overwriting of the loathly lady figure. The descriptions of Ragnell are certainly marked by indicators of agedness; she has grey hairs around her mouth[39]; yellowed teeth[40]; an emphasised pendulousness, including her hanging breasts[41]; a hunched posture[42]; and bleary eyes[43] which Feinstein suggests may indicate cataracts (38), and therefore emphasise her seniority. However, Feinstein suggests that

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[36] see page 52
[37] defiled
[38] deformed
[39] 'grey herys'(553:49)
[40] 'her tethe yalowe'(232:21)
[41] 'Hangyng pappys to be an hors lode'(241:21)
[42] 'A lute she bare upon her bak'(237:21)
[43] 'bleryd eyen'(233:21)

> her hideousness has less to do with aging [sic] as typically represented than with a burlesque portrait of conventional ugliness:[…] Perhaps her 'bleryd eyen' (233) are intended to suggest cataracts or her 'hangyng pappys' (241) to represent breasts sagging from age rather than size, but both these images are subsumed by the overall impression of what Jean Jost calls 'unnatural' features that 'are contrary to those of a human being. (38).

Similarly, Niebrzydowski maintains that 'Dame Ragnell is monstrous yet retains a youthful appearance' (89). Unnaturalness, or 'an unsemely syghte' (248:22), is what *the Weddynge* would appear to characterise Ragnell with, rather than agedness, per se. Undeniably, she is not weak, frail, nor impotent- a conventional portrait of old age[44]. The fact that she can eat as much as six people[45] and has a libidinousness[46] that would traditionally align her with a masculine role, rather than a frail old woman, draws upon and disrupts the hypostasised gender categories at play. The horror of her hideousness is equally met with glamorous opulence, such as when she dons her wedding attire and is 'arayd in the richest maner'(590:52). This contrasts which '[f]or alle her rayment, she bare the belle Of fowlnesse'[47](595:52) situates her as the archetype of grotesque, defined differently than simply hideous or repulsive. Rather, Ragnell's grotesqueness elicits more than just repulsion or horror; she 'opens up indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images and figures' (Edwards and Graulund: 3) through her appearance. In *Grotesque*, Edwards and Graulund affirm that grotesqueness is a

> process of systematic of unnattachment, [which] in turn, acknowledges the possibilities of an open structure in which there can be no certainty, no exclusive or permanent state of something which does already contain within it something else: there is no beauty without ugliness[…] Stallybrass and White point to a liminal form of the grotesque [… that surpasses] the conventional oppositions of refined/foul, high/low, or culture/savagery'(3-6)

Additionally, it may not be possible to say whether tropes of 'ugliness' can be hierarchised by modern standards; for example, the loathly lady figure is consistently associated with old age, which, in a

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[44] See discussion of *Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Pardoner's Tale,* p. 57.

[45] 'She ete as moche as six that ther wore'(605:53)

[46] 'A, Sir Gawen, syn I have you wed, \Shewe me your cortesy in bed; \With ryghte itt may nott be denyed'(629-31:), which could be read in modern English as 'Ah, Sir Gawain, since I have married you\ Show me your courtesy in bed;\By [marriage] right, it may not be denied'.

[47] This may be translated to 'for all her fine clothing, she won the prize for ugliness'

contemporary Western society that idolises youthfulness and marginalises the old, may have negative connotations that can cloud the reading of medieval figures. Feinstein writes that the 'meaning of old age is not fixed and it has different meanings in different contexts… Much of the difficulty is interpreting past discourses about old age is that it often served polemical or metaphorical rather than descriptive purposes […] and we cannot readily determine whether one or the other was culturally dominant'. (Feinstein: 25)

Given that Ragnelle does not definitively subscribe to the tropes of young or old in the Wedding, these physical qualities serve as allusions to the anxiety surrounding the ageing women as figures intent on their own agency and insistent on their desires. Moreover, Ragnelle's aged attributes establish a dialectic with her post-transformational (youthful) self, which through her behaviour she destabilises and throws into question. Her young and old personas confer upon each other respective qualities and are enmeshed in fluidity and negotiability; by being undefined in this way, Ragnelle's complex organisations of time and identity foreground the simultaneity of being young and old and complicate the possibility of maternity in her marriage.

The notion of time in the medieval period is not devoid of a political dimension. For rural and agricultural communities, 'there was no unified time or chronology'(Le Goff: 175), in that 'various chronological styles coexisted in the medieval west, often bound to 'the vagaries of nature'(176), ecclesiastical circles, or seasonal cycles. In this way, temporality and culture in medieval literature could be said to have a symbiotic relationship, as Jacques Le Goff writes that:

> medieval men [sic] used chronological points of reference borrowed from different sociotemporal frameworks which were imposed on them by various economic and social systems. […] Measures of time and space were an especially important instrument of social domination. Whoever was master over them enjoyed peculiar power over society…Like writing, the measurement of time remained for much of the middle ages the monopoly of the powerful, an element of their power. (177)

Uneven power distributions operate through the 'various chronological styles'(177) that coexisted in medieval Europe; without reliable instruments for measuring time, Le Goff suggests that a 'tendency towards Manichaeism' was adopted by 'peasants', which encouraged a sense of temporality made up of contrasts, 'the opposition of dark and light, of cold and heat, of work and rest, of life and

death'(178). For this reason, 'rural time' was predominated by cyclical representations of temporality that fluctuated between these dialectical contrasts.

The cyclical nature of time commands the first part of the romance, as Arthur and Sir Gromer arrange to meet 'att this day twelfe monethes end'[48] (93); this creates a sense of symmetry and cyclical fulfilment in the contractual obligations of the chivalric duty. Additionally, this temporal economy entwines seasonal, or the "natural" passing of time, with cultural temporal markers, such as how Sir Gromer represents the Summer solstice, while his sister, as it is noted by Bugge, represents his wintry antipode. Moreover, even the contractual obligations between King Arthur and Sir Gromer, the sovereign and the outsider, are governed by these seasonal cycles, as they agree to meet exactly a year after their first encounter. Bugge posits that Ragnelle conveys the seasonal allegory of the barren land being fertilised by sun avatar Gawain[49], informing his work with two-seed theory[50].

Therefore, the oath-making in the first part of the romance is bound by specific temporal confines, as Arthur and Sir Gromer meet at 'twelfe monethes end'. This establishes the temporal boundaries of the romance early on as precise; the oaths between men are structured around a seasonal axis. However, when Ragnell is introduced to the romance she challenges these binary axes, be that night/day, public/private, old/young. Moreover, when she has been assimilated into the structural temporality of the court, her recalcitrance persists through her relationship with Gawain, who 'shirks his chivalric obligations because he loiters all day in his beloved wife's bed'(Forste-Grupp: 111), to Arthur's dismay. Howe posits that Ragnelle 'continues to destabilize Gawain's knightly identity even after the transformation [which] suggests that it is not medieval femininity that Dame Ragnell's unstable body throws into chaos, but rather the inherent integrity of chivalric masculinity'(70). At the

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[48] 'on this day in twelve months', also repeated lines 104 and 167.

[49] 'Gawain has long been acknowledged in myth as an avatar of the sun-god'(Bugge: 201)

[50] Two-Seed theory was a popular medical theory in the medieval period. It proposed that in order for conception to take place during intercourse between a man and a woman, both had to 'emit seed'; that is, without orgasm for both parties, conception could not occur. Bugge explains this as follows: 'A number of pre-Socratic philosophers believed that the female plays an active role in conception, but it was Hippocrates who is credited with first asserting that both spouses contributed seminal fluids and that without doubt the embryo comes from the union of two seeds. The theory was more fully elaborated in the second century C.E. by Galen, who stipulated that for conception to occur it was necessary that the woman be "active" and also produce her own "seed." In practical terms, this meant that the woman must experience what the male experiences in the emission of his seed—that is, orgasm.' (208)

start of the romance, the temporal strictures based around oath-making work to test and confirm Gawain's loyalty to Arthur; Ragnelle's assimilation into the court actually attenuates that which it tested, as Gawain chooses to lay in bed with his wife over performing his knightly duties. This temporal economy incorporates the social, sexual, and contractual conduct of the player's in the romance, from fertilising the land in Spring as a metaphor for medieval sexuality, to governing the oath Arthur makes to Sir Gromer. Thus, temporality is a vessel for the conduct of the characters, as it imposes specific 'sociotemporal frameworks' upon them; disrupting or negating these temporal boundaries is therefore both *unnatural* and *uncivilised* in the Wedding, and it is one of the ways in which Ragnelle challenges the politics of politeness at play. Ragnell's impoliteness and her sense of both tardiness and precipitateness permeate the romance and leave the trace of her recalcitrance even after she is ostensibly assimilated into the courtly structure.

Ragnelle assimilates into the Arthurian court, circumvents the rules of primogeniture, and obtains a position of female power rivalled only by that of Dame Gaynor[51]; moreover, she ruptures the narrative of linear progress conventionally assigned to medieval literature and culture. This line of argument inquires into the conceptualisation of time, not only as a linear, sequential leveller, but also as a sexed and gendered category. I posit that theories of queer temporality alongside the untimely, or 'a temporal becoming-other' can richly inform *the Weddynge*, in which 'twin reifications'(Harris: 11) of time are consistently centralised only to be shattered. I will attempt to explain these two theoretical frameworks as follows:

1. *The Untimely*: Jonathan Gil Harris positions the untimely as a counter argument to 'the national sovereignty model of temporality' employed by new historicists, which 'works to separate time into a linear series of units […] each of which is partitioned from what precedes and follows it'(2). By conceptualising the past as a contingent succession of discrete epochs, the interconnectedness,

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[51] '[Ragnelle] negotiates for herself a position in court second only to that of Arthur's queen Gaynor'(Forste-Grupp, 118)/ 'Of fayrnesse she bare away the bewtye'(803), may be translated to 'She bore the prize for beauty' or fairness.

the slipperiness, the polychronicity[52], and multitemporality[53] of time is occluded from the conversation. Harris uses the idea of the classical/medieval palimpsest to express how 'the apparition of the 'old' text shatters the integrity of the 'new' by introducing into it a radical alterity that punctures the illusion of its wholeness or finality'(15). This illusion, as such, is the insistence that history is perpetually propelled towards a final, whole, or perfect epoch, which is thwarted by the spectre of *the untimely*. Harris insists that, in reading the textual past, we should 'resist the reflex of organising the relations between matter's multiple temporal traces into a chronological narrative of progress' (24). This 'narrative of progress' works to hierarchise history and subjugate the past to the control of a future-orientated present. By rejecting these temporal ontologies, 'we can glimpse another temporality that exceeds and complicates the reifications of the self-identical moment and the diachronic sequence'(10). In his book, Harris employs Nietzsche's *unzeitgemässe*, or "untimely", a term which 'does not simply connote the persistence of the past in the present; it also has a critical dimension. By resisting absorption into a homogeneous present, it brings with it the difference that produces the possibility of a new future even as it evokes the past' (Harris: 11). Harris explains how the untimely is iterated by other theorists, including Deleuze and Guattari, for whom the term is 'a temporal becoming-other that subverts twin reifications of time as epoch and chronological sequence', and Jacques Derrida, who configured the untimely as 'the ghost of a superseded past that, by reintroducing radical alterity into an otherwise self-identical present, models the justice of the other'(11). I aim to show that Ragnell invokes the untimely, in the sense that the romance flaunts its multitemporality, produces 'diverse organisations of time'(13), and allows past and present to imaginatively converse with one another.

2. *'Traditional notions of the historical past are both sexed and gendered'*(McAvoy: 3): Much in the same way that Harris' ideas of cultural materialism shatter the linear axis of past and future,

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[52] 'Serres notion of the polychronic [asserts] that objects collate many different moments, as suggested by Latour's polytemporal toolbox' (Harris: 4)

[53] '[this theory] also insists on [the object's] multitemporal properties - that is, its materialisation of diverse relations among past, present, and future' (Harris: 4)

feminist criticism has similarly posited that traditional notions of time are entrenched in patriarchal matrices of gender. In Liz Herbert McAvoy's introduction to *Reconsidering Gender, Time, and Memory in Medieval Culture*, she collates theories of gendered temporality, including the works of Dinshaw, Irigaray and Halberstam. For example, McAvoy writes that Luce Irigaray is 'highly critical of western culture's inherently sexed and gendered conception of linear time and historical 'progress' [and] posits that [the dominant culture's] relation to time and memory in the West has long been dependent upon the patriarchal subjugation of women, whose life-cycles and temporal daily rhythms have traditionally differed from those of men'. She continues that '[women's experience has been] overwritten by a male model of temporality based on the rigid linear logic of a past-present-future that ensures 'his' own genealogy, with woman as the vessel […] that facilitates that 'progress''(3). McAvoy explains how our awareness of the pervasive narrative of history as a contingent, reproductive, and singular objective obscures the representation of temporality in the Middle Ages; 'Dinshaw […] unearths the Middle Ages as a site of the multiple and the queer which serves to disrupt temporal and spatial stereotypes and uncovers the disruptive presence of 'a more heterogeneous' *now* that knows no temporal boundaries'(4). As such, medieval criticism that sloughs off 'a deeply gendered modernist project'(7) of the hypostasisation of linear time 'interrogates the notion of 'time' as a single reified entity, with its connotations of organizing, arranging, ordering and policing space and the operations of those who occupy it'(2). Moreover, this polarising of past/future not only assumes that temporal thought has perpetually progressed towards an ever-accumulating version of the 'now', but also that medievals were ignorant to the simultaneity, the amorphous structure, and the intersecting and overlapping iterations of temporality that persist in the literature they produced; 'clearly,' McAvoy writes, 'the inherent queerness of time was a commonplace for the medieval subject and something to be negotiated on a daily basis'. (5)

Specifically, this shattering of linearity manifests itself through the expression of time as binary in the first part of *the Wedding*, be that Winter/Summer, day/night, old/young polarisations. Medievalist

John Bugge presents *the Wedding* as a fertility myth, suggesting that Gromer Somer Joure, meaning 'man of Summer's day', or Summer solstice (Bugge: 200), is dialectically opposed to his sister, Ragnell, who 'presages disaster and death' (203):

> The *descriptio* of Ragnell signals a close association with postmenopausal infertility, which is to say with non-life—or with death. And not only is she a baleful, *wintry figure* to her brother's "summer's day," she does seem to threaten both Gawen and the king with mortality'. (203, emphasis added).

'Although she is not in fact advanced in years' (203), Ragnell's figuration consistently alludes to the spectre of agedness and foulness. Bugge insists that in 'the deep-lying and anterior mythic register, the more fundamental reason why [Ragnelle's] age is a problem is that it makes her *infertile'* (203). By association, she represents the spectre of death not only in her marriage to such an eligible bachelor, but also in her control over the life and death of the sovereign. Moreover, the likening of Ragnell to an owl positions her as temporally Other. Yet to acquire the contemporary associations of wisdom, owls in the medieval period were omens of death, according to the *Medieval Bestiary Online*: 'The owl haunts ruins and flies only at night; preferring to live in darkness it hides from the light […] It is often found near tombs and lives in caves. Some say it flies backwards'. This draws Ragnell into alignment not only with the owl as a spectre of death, but also as a nocturnal creature; both of these derivative associations align her with the negative antipode of the day/night dialectic, an aspect becomes increasingly significant in the romance as a way of expressing her subtle subversion of the court. Furthermore, the nocturnal association emphasises the divisions between day and night, a binary that comes into the fore when Ragnelle reveals that her diurnal and nocturnal forms are superlatively opposite, being either a hag or a beauty. Ragnell is aware of the difficulty that her foulness presents to Gawain; she phrases the decision over her form in a way that emphasises the public shame that her hideousness incurs. She says

> 'Wheder ye wolle have me fayre on nyghtes
> And as foulle on days to alle men sightes'. (659-60:59)

Gawain compounds this anxiety about the public perception of her hideousness as he puzzles over the decision, saying,

> 'To have you fayre on nyghtes and no more,

> That wold greve my hartt ryghte sore,
> And my worshypp shold I lese'. (670-3)

This fear of Gawain losing his 'worshypp' emphasises daytime as the public domain, as according to the *Medieval English Dictionary*, the word can be taken to mean 'honour, high respect […]; fame, glory, renown'. By having a publicly foul wife 'to alle men sightes', Gawain's honour would be lost, which reinforces day as exposed and night as private. Ragnell has ensured that these predetermined temporal associations are as profound as possible, as she has said that 'wold nott be weddyd in no maner/ Butt there were made a krye in all the shyre, /Bothe in town and in borowe'(557-9:49)[54]. By establishing these temporal dichotomies, the romance depicts Ragnell as posing a challenge to these hypostasised divisions; she insists that her wedding is as public as possible, despite being characterised as belonging to the night. In other words, she transgresses the strictly policed boundaries of night/day, private/public. This temporal transgression can be noted in the romance when Gaynor suggests to Ragnell that she marries Gawain early in the morning:

> The Queen prayd Dame Ragnelle sekerly -
> "To be maryed in the mornyng erly,
> As pryvaly as ye may." [55](569-571:50)

Ragnell rejects this suggestion, insisting that she will 'be weddyd alle openly'(575:51) and 'wolle nott to churche tylle Highe Masse tyme'[56](578:51), or as publicly as possible. In this, daytime is figured as public and night-time as private; as such, time is politicised, divided into oppositional units, and categorised according with status and sociability, at least within the courtly structure. Leech suggests that the 'public ritualising' of Ragnell's marriage is a way of 'socially legitimising' it, noting that 'a private marriage early in the day will not place Dame Ragnell in the social position she desires'(220). Ragnell dramatically challenges these structures of temporality and politeness by erupting in the public space of the romance and disrupting the established temporal and visible boundaries of the court. Instead of figuring her as a source of shame or illegitimacy, she demands to

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[54] 'would not be wedded in any way,/ unless it was proclaimed in every shire/ Both in town and borough.'
[55] 'The Queen prayed [of] Ragnell steadfastly/'To be married in the early morning/as privately as you can'
[56] 'will not go to church until High mass time'

be publicly married, and therefore accepted by the court. In comparison, her analogous hag sister in

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* is largely elided from in narrative, except to serve a didactic purpose

for her betrothed. The Wife of Bath says,

> I seye ther nas no joye ne feste at al;
> Ther nas but hevynesse and muche sorwe.
> For prively he wedded hire on a morwe,
> And al day after hidde hym as an owle,
> So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule. (1077-82)[57]

Not only does the narrator emphasise the privacy of the ceremony, in stark contrast to *the Wedding*,

she also mentions the knight's likeness to an owl. While this potentially endows the Knight with

uncleanliness[58], another association of owls in this period, it may also imply that the knight retreats

into nocturnal privacy, the inverse of Ragnelle's advance into daytime fame. While the Wife of Bath

says that there was no joy or festivity at the ceremony, Ragnelle is positively exuberant at her public

feast. Furthermore, Ragnell's vivacious insistence on publicity and challenges the conventions of old

age in medieval literature. For example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, comparative portraits

of Lady Bertilak and her elderly companion illustrate the effacement of agedness:

> These ladies were very unalike in appearance,
> for the younger was fresh, while the other was withered.
> Bright red adorned the first lady all over;
> rough wrinkled cheeks hung slack on the other.
> The young one wore scarves and many bright pearls;
> her breast and white throat exposed to view
> shone brighter than new-fallen snow on the hillside.
> The old lady's neck was covered by a wimple,
> pulled over her sallow chin with chalk-white veils.
> Her forehead was masked in silk, muffled all over,
> covered and screened with jewellery all round,
> her eyes and nose and her bare lips,
> which were ghastly to look at and horribly chapped. (950-963)

While the beautiful young Lady Bertilak is 'exposed to view', the old lady is 'covered'; what skin is

visible on the older lady is 'ghastly to look at'. Although their dress is not dissimilar in opulence, on

the younger lady, the pearls draw attention to her 'breast' and 'white throat', while on the other, her

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[57] Could be interpreted in modern English as follows: "I say there was no joy nor festivity at all;/There was nothing but heaviness and much sorrow./For privately he wedded her the next morrow,/And all day afterwards he hid like an owl, /So woeful he was that his wife was so foul"

[58] 'It is a dirty, slothful bird that pollutes its own nest with its dung' ("Owl", *The Medieval Bestiary Online*)

finery 'masks' and 'muffles' her from view. This idea of agedness being occluded is similarly conveyed in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, in which three rioters meet an ambiguous figure; whether he is simply an old man, or the embodiment of Death, come to deceive them, the rioters are horrified by his withered appearance and ragged clothing, which alludes to a death shroud.

> "An oold man and a povre with hem mette.
> This olde man ful mekely hem grette",
> […]
> "Why artow al forwrapped save thy face?
> Why lyvestow so longe in so greet age?"
> […]
> "Lo how I vanysshe, flessh, and blood, and skyn!
> Allas, whan shyl my bones been at reste?
> Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste
> That in my chambre long tyme hath be,
> Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrap me!
> But yet to me she wol nat do that grace,
> For which ful pale and welked is my face."(713-738)[59]

In these limited examples that agedness is depicted as something unpleasant to look on and out of place; in the instance of the *Green Knight*, it serves as auxiliary to the beauty of Lady Bertilak; while in *The Pardoner's Tale*, it haunts the text with an uncomfortable reminder of the inevitability of death and decay. However, in both these instances, agedness is explicitly omitted, and its instances of publicity are didactic or auxiliary to the protagonist. Although being an old hag, Ragnelle's agedness is different. She does not waste away, disease ridden like the old man in *the Pardoner's Tale*; nor does she retreat into a demure wimple, like the 'venerable' old lady in *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Rather, Ragnelle oscillates between old and young, not only in her transformation, but in the incongruence between her outward appearance of agedness and her youthful exuberance and vivacious sexual energy.

Ragnelle radically challenges temporal structures of the romance through this power to transform between old and young. Feinstein writes that 'new distributions of power developing from

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[59] May be considered in modern English as follows: 'An old man, a pauper met with them, This old man very meekly greeted them/[…]/'Why are you all wrapped up except your face?/Why do you live so long despite your old age?/[…]/Lo how I vanish [waste away], flesh, blood, and skin!/Alas, when will my bones be at rest?/Mother, with you would I exchange my chest [strongbox for valuables]/That has been in my chamber a long time,/Yes, for an hair cloth [shroud] to wrap me!/But yet she will not do me the honour,/which is my face is so pale and whelked [wrinkled].'

demographic changes may partly account for the overdetermined medieval representations of a type of old woman, one independent and insistent on her desires'(24), a trope which in medieval romances 'interrogate[s] dynastic issues'(23) such as primogeniture. Like Forste-Grupp, Feinstein considers the loathly lady figure as one which possesses the power to speak back to 'comic potential' conventionally assigned to them, noting that 'while inhabiting old and ugly bodies, these female characters, be they grandmothers, queens, or putative loathly ladies, already possess what it is said women most desire'(41). In her hag form, Ragnell occupies a distinctly dominant subject position, able to demand her publicity and marriage. Although she retains some of this post-transformation power through securing inheritance rights for her prospective progeny and being revered by the court, she ultimately relinquishes some of her sovereignty as a hag in order to be subsumed into the hierarchies of Arthur's court. Feinstein writes that 'those weaker, male and female, threaten the dominant order signified by the King's authority over property... Power does not usually reside in the Other, represented in these tales as bewitches female characters, ugly as can be imagined or as old age: that it does is part of the magic, a magic responsible for transformations and romance love itself'(40). Dialectically, that which threatens the structures of power and the sovereign himself (Arthur) each sacrifice some of their individual power in order to strengthen the whole, the collective, homogenising reach of power itself.

Ragnelle's impoliteness, which is manifest in her active choice to negate medieval figurations of temporal dialectics, allows the loathly lady to reorganise patriarchal instrumentalisations of time. As the romance propels forth the patriarchal sense of temporality as a genealogical compulsion, it simultaneously ruptures the court's organisations of time, which are predicated on chivalric conduct and homosocial relationships. Homosocial temporality's principles of arranging, ordering, policing, and subjugating feminine bodies is countered by Ragnelle's untimeliness, which erupts into the romance through both visible and invisible reorganisations of time. Some critics have labelled Ragnelle old and others have defended her youthfulness; perhaps it is more appropriate to say that she is untimely, in that she exceeds the cultural organisation of temporality as self-identical and

future-oriented. Rather, her physical body, her behaviour, and her disregard for social strictures, which amount in her reorganisation of temporal codes, allow her to flaunt the multitemporality of the loathly lady.

Conclusions

Mary Beard's manifesto *Women and Power* (2017) traces the classical representation of women's voices through to the derision aimed at women's bodies in positions of contemporary influence. She pursues these links from Medusa, Clytemnestra, and Athena, to Theresa May, Angela Merkel, and Hillary Clinton; even herself, Mary Beard, as a female academic in a 'male dominated field'(10), has been a target of misogynistic disparagement for her physical appearance. Her short manifesto, which is made up of two recent lectures, is relevant to the discussion of gender, politics, and politeness for a number of reasons; her depth of knowledge on classical literature alone would be enough to fuel another chapter on politeness and the female gaze. However, what is integral to Beard's discussion is the acknowledgement that women will never precisely fit into a structure of power that is orchestrated to exclude, hierarchise, and suppress feminine voices. Rather, she proposes that such structures can be imaginatively refigured to distribute power more evenly among peoples, including women, that counteracts the gender exclusivity of Western hierarchies, as they are now. Perhaps, then, the politics of politeness as a medium of homosocial domination can also be reconstituted to serve new means; to signal deference, to inscribe one's gender, to convey complex iterations of understanding are surely not necessarily misogynistic. In examining *the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, I aimed to show that manifestations of politeness incite to order both women's bodies and their behaviour. Although many have suggested that Ragnelle's ending requires her submission to homosocial order, it is also possible to observe that, in circumventing these strictures of politeness, Ragnelle has her cake and eats it, literally and metaphorically. The audience or reader, too, enjoy the spectacle of Ragnelle's unruly impoliteness and haggish indelicacy, for which she is never explicitly punished, regardless of the contemporary interpretation of her immanent death.

This paper has collated existing medievalist criticism with close textual analysis of *the Wedding* in order to consider the implications of politeness in medieval literature. Ragnelle resists the ideological demands of beauty and refinement, which work to inscribe femininity as submissive and permissive within the homosocial order of Arthur's court. By deferring from ideas of conventional

beauty as both a civilised and civilising principle, Ragnelle's representation of impoliteness is a counterpoint to the misogyny attached to 'ugly' women. She redefines the category as someone demanding of her rights, aware of her political influence, and commanding of her social agency. In circumventing her acceptably sanctioned rights, Ragnelle's tale is one of gender and legal standing; rather than being rewarded for compliance, the hag dramatically challenges the ideologies of politeness in order to obtain her inheritance, and by extension, status. In her disruption of the integrity of the homosocial order, Ragnelle's challenge to political authority is not only mirrored in her gender nonconformity; additionally, it is her nonconformity and impoliteness itself that is highly political. By throwing into question both the widely accepted legal standing of heiresses and the manifestation of femininity itself, Ragnelle's impoliteness exceeds simple categorisation or ostracisation as she inserts herself into the court 'emblematic of all things civilised'(Niebrzydowski: 97). Moreover, by rupturing medieval organisations of time, Ragnelle counters the strictures of politeness manifest in temporality. Her multitemporality, her renegotiation of gendered time, and her resistance to temporal expectations have allowed Ragnelle's character to be figured as radically impolite and persistently political. Even in her post-transformational silence, she retains a power to speak in the way she exceeds the organisations of time that cycle around restricting feminine bodily autonomy and subjugate women to Manichaean polarisations.

The critical field of politics and politeness in medieval literature requires much further research, as one romance hardly represents the diverse, contradictory, and complementary narratives operating in such a seminal time period. It would be interesting to pursue not only the representation of politeness in medieval literature, but also in neomedieval texts; that is, texts that emulate the Middle Ages in some form and use this medium to convey their own political agenda. The comparative study of medieval and neomedieval texts aims to slough away presuppositions about the Middle Ages, particularly those that aim to affirm racial, gendered, and political hierarchies. By questioning assumptions about medieval subjects, the politics of politeness can be reimagined to dispel ideas of the medieval past as an orthodox, primitive, or original state. Distinguishing between medieval

literature and its political over-text will challenge the hypostatisation of misogynistic agendas in the loathly lady figure and instead allow them to speak back to such gendered attacks. Ragnelle, as an iteration of the loathly lady, engages with the politicisation of impoliteness to resist structures that aim to exclude, subjugate, or homogenise feminine bodies. By countering the dominance of the Arthurian court, she usurps the discourses of conduct, respectability, and complicity that underpin its political agenda and reinscribes them with the unruly, unsettling, and unrefined behaviour that she so emphatically embodies.

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