

Dr. Obermeier

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Real Women are Ugly: The Relationship Between Beauty, Ugliness, and Power in *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure, Sir Launfal, and Pearl* ✓

Beauty, power, and female characters are often intermingled in some way in Middle English romances and dream visions. Images of both beautiful women and ugly women were standardized by the works of rhetoricians and teacher-poets like Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf in the late twelfth century and early thirteenth century so that the descriptions of both attractive and beastly women which appear in medieval literature were fairly similar. In the Middle English romances *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*, and *Sir Launfal*, and the dream vision *Pearl* the relationship between beauty, ugliness, and female power is apparent. Only the supernatural characters, such as Dame Tryamour and the bride of Christ in *Pearl* possess both beauty and true power or *sovereignty* over their male counterparts. In these three pieces, female characters who are depicted as realistic-type, human women, such as Dame Ragnell and Guinevere, cannot possess both beauty and ✓ power over the construct of the male dominated social structure within the literature.

To a modern reader, what appears as beautiful in literature is largely up for discussion and dependent upon individual opinion. However, this was not so in literature during the middle ages. Guidelines for rhetorical devices presented in two style manuals written in the late twelfth century and early thirteenth century governed how writers handled images of beauty and descriptions of female beauty in particular. Matthew of Vendôme wrote *Ars Versificatoria* (*The*

Art of Versification) in about 1175 and Geoffrey of Vinsauf wrote his *Poetria Nova* (*The New Poetics*) between 1200 and 1215. In reference to these two manuals, in his 1955 article "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature" D.S. Brewer states, "The works of these two rhetoricians were used as school-books, and their influence was immense" (259). The guidelines set forth for poetry by these two men appear throughout medieval literature.

Among the many aspects of poetry Matthew of Vendôme addresses in *The Art of Versification*, his guidelines for the description of female beauty derive from classical Greek and Latin poetry. On female descriptions in particular he says, "many qualities ought to be set forth. For no one is sufficiently described by one or two or even just a few epithets Furthermore, in praising a woman one should stress heavily her physical beauty" (Matthew of Vendôme 45-6). He includes his own poetry as well as quotes from other classical authors within the manual as models. As an example of how to describe a woman he includes two lengthy descriptions of Helen of Troy. The descriptions follow a head-to-toe direction and begin with her golden hair. She also has a forehead and face without blemishes, neat, dark eyebrows, eyes that sparkle like the stars, snow-white skin, a narrow and perfectly angled nose, rosy, delicate lips, straight and even teeth likened to ivory, and, "Her smooth neck and shoulders whiter than / Snow give way to firm but dainty breasts" (Matthew of Vendôme 43). True to his own guidelines, Matthew provides an extensive description of feminine beauty which stresses physical appearance.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf also discusses description in his *Poetria Nova*: "Description, pregnant with words, follows as a seventh means of amplifying the work. But although the path of description is wide, let it also be wise, let it be both lengthy and lovely. See that the words with due ceremony are wedded to the subject" (Geoffrey of Vinsauf 36). He too stresses the physical appearance of a woman in describing her and like Matthew, begins with her golden hair

and follows through to her breasts and waist: "Let her breast, the image of snow, show side by side its twin virginal gems. Let her waist be close girt, and so slim that a hand may encircle it So let the radiant description descend from the top of her head to her toe, and the whole be polished to perfection" (Geoffrey of Vinsauf 37). Geoffrey also includes an account of the lady's attire as well, adorning her with jewels, ribbons, and the richest of clothing. Lastly, both Matthew and Geoffrey attribute the perfect physical qualities of their ladies to the grace of Nature.

The concept of beauty cannot exist without the concept of the gaze or the observer. Robin Hass in her 2002 article "A Picture of Such Beauty in Their Minds': The Medieval Rhetoricians, Chaucer, and Evocative Effictio" effectively incorporates Laura Mulvey's ideas on the male gaze and the female form in cinema to medieval literature. Mulvey states in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that the scopophilic gaze "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (2185). She goes on to say that "[t]he determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey 2186). Using these ideas, Hass then logically concludes that

[t]he medieval descriptive theory propounded by Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf codes one particular type of the female body in such a manner, stylizing it to appeal to the male gaze and to represent male desire, which is in accordance with the visual impact of the beloved in the medieval patterns of courtly love and the visual epistemology of the medieval perspectivists. (388-9)

Thus the scopophilic male gaze perpetuates the common figure in medieval literature of the blonde beauty with sparkling eyes, white-as-snow skin, a perfect nose, red lips, dainty breasts, and tiny waist. Beauty, however, is not just skin deep.

Description, according to Matthew of Vendôme, can also be two-fold: “one external, one internal” (48). Brewer notes that in the medieval love story a woman’s “physical beauty often becomes a reflection of her moral beauty,” and that by the sixteenth century there are few examples of “typically beautiful heroines whose physical beauty does not reflect moral beauty” (262). He does note that there are exceptions, namely “the indecencies of Latin lyrics; Helen of Troy; possibly Arthur’s Guinevere¹; and Briseyda-Criseyde. Medieval writers do not neglect the corruption of the good;” however, the idea that a beautiful woman represents a morally good person is a common trope in medieval literature (Brewer 262).

Thus it follows that if a beautiful woman stands to represent honorable values and virtues, then the opposite is true for the description of an ugly woman. Walter Clyde Curry writes in his 1916 book *The Middle English Ideal of Personal Beauty; as Found in the Metrical Romances, Chronicles, and the Legends of the XIII, XIV, and XV Centuries* that

[i]t is a peculiarity of the medieval mind to think of beauty as a characteristic of the good, and to look upon ugliness as the distinguishing trait of the evil.

Consequently all wicked, malicious, and treacherous persons are presented as being loathsome in their ugliness the utter depravity and wickedness of evil characters is suggested by a detailed description of loathly and deformed bodies.

(6)

¹ For simplicity’s sake I am normalizing the spelling of Guinevere’s name due to the varies spellings within *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*, and *Sir Launfal*.

According to Curry, as far as descriptions of ugly women are concerned, "only a few descriptions of ugly women are to be found; and these are given with the apparent purpose of heightening, thru contrast, the beauty of the heroine" (7). As outlined by Henrik Specht in his 1984 article "The Beautiful, the Handsome, and the Ugly: Some Aspects of the Art of Character Portrayal in Medieval Literature" the most common physical traits of a hideous character include unkempt hair, a dark complexion, general hairiness, large, staring eyes, a huge, broad, flat face, a nose that is either excessively large or small, a grinning mouth with large, pointed, fang-like teeth, a disproportionate sized head and body, and other miscellaneous corporeal disfigurements (138).

Specht also states that ugliness functions to arouse "aesthetic disgust and moral aversion against the person (or being) who is described as physically repulsive" (134). In addition to the fairly straightforward concept of physicality mirroring moral values, there are also other functions of ugliness which further stratify its role in literature. Specht names added ways in which ugliness appears coupled with some form of varied goodness or badness: the beautiful traitor, the noble savage, and "[f]inally, there is the topos which turns on the disfigurement of an intrinsically good and virtuous character whose ugliness is brought about by a variety of circumstances, such as martyrdom, self-imposed penance, temporary madness, or a temporary abasement owing to abduction or some other misfortune" (135). How these roles effect the women who are typified as such within medieval literature depends upon their social station and their characterization.

Within the ideal of feminine beauty and ugliness in medieval literature is also the interplay of female power and how women wield it within the construct of a male dominant social structure. *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure*,

written in about the middle of the fifteenth century, showcases an intriguing interaction between beauty, ugliness, and power. In this romance, unsightliness rather than beauty plays the main role in the form of Dame Ragnell, a bewitched yet virtuous young woman who suffers from a dreadful case of physical deformity, a form of ugliness already outlined by Specht, thanks to the “nygramancy” and “enchaument” of her stepmother (Specht 135; *The Weddyng* 691, 693). However, despite her ugliness, Dame Ragnell travels through the poem wielding a great deal of power over the characters within the story while her exterior appearance is dreadfully hideous. Here, beauty and power, rather than being linked directly, are inversely related. Dame Ragnell exercises her power, or her *sovereyneté*, most effectively over characters such as King Arthur, Guinevere, Gawen, and even the poet, while she is deformed.

Dame Ragnell’s power and *sovereyneté*, although she is unsightly, begins with the poet himself. Each time he says that there are no words to describe her ghastliness or that he will be brief in his description of her, the opposite occurs in the writing. When Dame Ragnell first appears in the poem to King Arthur the poet describes her as “ungoodly a creature / As ever man sawe, withoute measure” (*The Weddyng* 228-29). There follows a lengthy 16-line anti-blazon of the lady’s ugliness which entirely supports Specht’s outline of ugly characteristics and ends with a sort of delayed, and ultimately negated, ineffability topos: “There is no tung may tell, securly— / Of lothlyness inowgh she had” (*The Weddyng* 244-45). The extensive description of her grossness negates this claim of the inability of words to explain her. The author also spares nothing in his portrayal of Dame Ragnell’s repulsiveness at the wedding feast towards the end of the poem and thus fails “to make a shortt conclusion” of it by entertaining his audience with another long-lasting account of how much she ate, how quickly, and how disgustingly (*The Weddyng* 598-621). She is so ugly that not even the poet can control his pen when describing

her. Dame Ragnell's power in her ugliness does not stop with the poet but continues with King Arthur himself.

Upon their meeting in the woods, before Arthur even has the chance to speak, Dame Ragnell informs him that in her hands she has the power of preserving or destroying his life. She utters no pleasantries, no courtesies or kind greetings; there is simply this hideous looking creature's blatant display of *sovereignty* over the King himself: "Speke with me, I rede, or thou goo, / For thy lyfe is in my hand, I warn the soo— / That shalt thou fynde, and I itt nott lett" (*The Weddyng* 255-57). Dame Ragnell informs Arthur that she knows the answer to the question posed to him by Sir Gromer-Somer Jour concerning what women want most and she therefore controls the fate of his life. Her *sovereignty* here is valid because she does indeed save Arthur's life in giving him the answer to Gromer-Somer's question later in the poem. In possession of such knowledge, she demands that Arthur grant her Sir Gawen as a husband. The fact that Arthur says he will go to Gawen and ask him to marry her shows Dame Ragnell's ultimate power over Arthur. All she needs do is ask and he meets her demands.

Her power over Arthur rears its head again when she insists on riding into Karlyle with him as an escort and by his side having no qualms about telling him exactly how she wants to make her entrance:

Openly I wol be weddyd or I parte the froo,

Elles shame woll ye have!

Ryde before, and I woll come after

Unto thy courte, syr King Arthoure;

Of no man I woll shame—

.....

For no man wold she spare, securly—

Itt likyd the Kyng full yll! (*The Weddyng* 507-11; 519-20)

Arthur, clearly distressed and shamed by her forwardness and her ugliness, nevertheless does as she says and continues to grant her *sovereynté* over his own actions, pride, and reputation. Once within the kingdom, Dame Ragnell wields her commanding *sovereynté* over not only Arthur but over his Queen as well.

When Dame Guinevere suggests an early morning, private wedding ceremony Dame Ragnell unsheathes her strength and control once again, insisting on having her wedding at high noon and her feast in front of the entire court: “I woll nott to church tylle high masse tyme, / And in the open halle I woll dyne / In myddys of alle the rowte” (*The Weddyng* 578-80). Dame Ragnell exerts her clout over the Queen in such a confident and unapologetic way the Queen says the only thing one can when overpowered: “I am greed” (*The Weddyng* 581). Thus Dame Ragnell’s authority and *sovereynté* remain intact and her unattractiveness as potent as ever.

After the wedding and celebratory feast, the newlyweds adjourn to their chamber where Dame Ragnell brandishes her *sovereynté* lastly over her husband. After he learns of her beauty and fairness and she gives him the choice of governing over when her appearance is favorable and not, Gawen grants her the choice in exasperation:

Butt do as ye lyst nowe, my lady gaye;

The choyse I putt in your fyst—

Eryn as ye wolle, I putt itt in your hand,

Lose me when ye lyst, for I am bond—