DAME RAGNELL'S CULTURE: THE VORACIOUS LOATHLY LADY[1]

When we try to study popular literature in the Middle Ages we always meet the same problem: it was oral, so it can barely be guessed at, catching distorted and fragmentary glimpses of it, in written texts. It was not until the eighteenth century that scholars tried to make faithful records of oral culture. There is therefore a strong case for studying popular culture backwards (Burke 1994: 82), by using, in the present case, eighteenth century ballads as a base from which to consider earlier popular narrative. I propose to establish a link between the ballad of *King Henry* and the fifteenth-century romance of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, in order to make some points about this romance and similar tales told by Gower and Chaucer in the fourteenth century, and more generally about women's popular culture in the Middle Ages.

The most obvious ballad version of *Gawain and Ragnell* is not, however, *King Henry*, which was taken down from the most famous of popular ballad singers, Anna Gordon Brown, but a minstrel ballad contained in the seventeenth-century Percy Folio manuscript, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain.* In both Gawain must marry a loathly lady so as to save his uncle Arthur's life, and she turns into a beauty when Gawain grants her all her will. Therefore the only major difference between their plot and that of Gower's *Tale of Florent* and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* is that in the latter two the hero (who is not Gawain) performs the feat of marrying the loathly lady to save his own life, as it was *his* life that depended on her revealing to him the answer to the enigma of what women most desire, an enigma common to all four stories. *King Henry*, on the other hand, has the hero meeting the loathly lady without any

[1] Paper read at the Eighth International Conference of the Spanish Society for English Mediæval Language and Literature (SELIM), held at the Universitat Jaume I, Castelló de la Plana (Spain), on 25th-27th September 1995. Rewritten in February 2001 with minor corrections.

Rubén Valdés, *Selim* 9 (1999): 197—204

previous enigma: she just captures him and makes him feed her with loads of food and drink, even sacrificing his horse, hounds, and hawks for her to eat them whole, and then he must make her a bed with his mantle on the heather and make love to her. The crucial link between *King Henry* and the romance of *Gawain and Ragnell* is that the loathly lady gets, not only all her will, as in all other versions, but also all her *fill*. For, as Professor Patricia Shaw noted, "unlike the other loathly ladies, Dame Ragnell, to add to her charms, is presented as a monster of gluttony" (Shaw 1988: 216). The description of how King Henry fed the ogress takes up nearly half the ballad (eight out of twenty stanzas). It does not take so much of the romance, but nonetheless her voracity is made conspicuous by the hyperbolic and grotesque description of her wedding banquet, as shall be shown later.

Apart from the loathly lady's gluttony, *Gawain and Ragnell* and *King Henry* are related by a curious textual lacuna which, even if it is no more than a coincidence, it is a revealing one. A leaf with possibly some seventy lines is lacking in the manuscript containing the romance, just after the wedding episode, and before Dame Ragnell asks her husband to "show her courtesy in bed." Donald B. Sands (ed. 1986: 341) points out that the missing lines "probably noted how the wedded couple left Arthur's hall and retired to the bridal chamber." But seventy lines are too many for such a passage with no more ado. I would venture, therefore, that they might as well have contained a close, perhaps even obscene sketch of the loathly lady's grotesque body, to stress the trial that Gawain is enduring at the bridal bed. As for the ballad, most editors, including Child (1965: 299), find a gap after stanza 17, precisely after the loathly lady has ordered King Henry to take off his clothes and get into bed with her. The transition to the next stanza seems too abrupt even for a ballad. Suddenly it is sunrise and the beast turns into beauty, but we do not know how the hero actually fared in bed with the lady monster. We may wonder again whether some bawdy stanza was not *forgotten* by Anna Gordon, who, though extremely faithful to her ballads, took with them all the liberties to which a good ballad singer is entitled, and who, after all, was Reverend Andrew Brown's respectable wife. In short, these textual uncertainties suggest hesitations on the part of those who handed down the tradition, leaving gaps which perhaps cover up some indecorous trait of Dame Ragnell's sex.

From her first appearance, Dame Ragnell's aspect suggests she will be hard to fill up, for most of her physical description refers to her "wide" and "foul" mouth (Sands ed. 1986: 331-2, lines 231-45, 545-55). The description of her monstrous mouth has symbolical references to a sexual *and* digestive womb ("Her cheeks [were] side [i.e. broad] as wemmens hippes", line 236) that were typical of the representation of witches at the end of the Middle Ages, which are said to be founded upon pathological male obsessions (Kappler 1986: 309-14). King Arthur, whose heroism is much diminished in the poem, and the other courtiers would see her from such an angle. But in her description there is also humour, or, more precisely, what Bakhtin calls grotesque realism. The poem shares with *King Henry* and other ballads, including *Kempy Kay* and various Gaelic and Scandinavian analogues cited by Child (1965: 297-301), a zest for hyperbolic description which is traditional in tales of magic. In this sense, the romance implies a confrontation between the courtly, official culture of King Arthur, and the popular comic culture that Dame Ragnell embodies.

To understand what official, respectable culture feared of female voracity - whether for food or sex, the difference was seldom made - we just have to turn briefly to the many "learned" discourses of medieval misogyny. Woman was "envious, capricious, irascible, avaricious, as well as intemperate with drink and voracious in the stomach" (Marbod of Rennes); like the monstrous Chimaera, to who she is very often identified, she has "the belly of a stinking goat" (Walter Map); "no woman [since Even took the apple] has ever been seen who did not yield when tempted to the vice of gluttony" (Andreas Capellanus); her "gluttony, disobedience, and persuasions were the cause and origin of all our miseries" (Giovanni Boccaccio) (Blamires ed. 1992: 101, 105, 119, 172). In contrast with all these (at the time) serious condemnations is what comic culture tended to make of that commonplace of female voracity.

Let us cite four literary examples before returning to Dame Ragnell. Three are taken from drama, perhaps the genre which is most likely to reflect on popular comicality; the other is from the Scottish *makar* William Dunbar, a master of grotesque realism. Perhaps the most proverbial glutton after Eve is Noah's Wife of the Chester cycle, who will not yield to enter the patriarchal Ark until she has drunk a quart bottle of good and strong "malmesy" with her gossip (Happé ed. 1985: 127, lines 229-36). Secondly, the wife of Mak the sheep-thief in the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Play*, who besides being "as

great as a whale" and full of "gall" (ill-temper), eats "as fast as she can" and drinks "well, too", and gives birth to a child a year, some years two (Happé ed. 1985: 269-70, 275, lines 100-6, 237-43), which makes Mak obsessed with feeding his fast growing family and so pushes him to stealing. Then we have Dunbar's "Twa Cummeris", who, after intimating that "in bed their husbands are not worth a bean" decide that "this long Lent should not make them lean" and take vengeance on their husbands by drinking two quarts of "mavasy" (i.e., Malmsey) wine (Kinsley ed. 1989: 77-8, lines 21-30). Last but not least, the Sowtar's Wife and the Tailor's Wife in Lindsay's *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, who, after literally chasing Chastity away and beating up their husbands, make no bones about folding up their clothes above their waist, to cross the worldly water and run to town for a bottle of good wine and pastry to comfort their bodies (Lyall ed. 1989: 49, lines 1376-87). All these examples present women who challenge the institution of marriage because they can get no satisfaction from their husbands, and who eat and drink in order to avenge themselves.

Fortunately we have a book like Caroline W. Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987) to help us understand the significance of food to medieval women. The way Bynum views it, abstinence for holy women was not really an ascetic flight from fleshliness, but an expression of their power to manipulate their own bodies. For if women saints, notably Mary Magdalene, often renounced food like male saints generally renounced wealth, it was because food was the only thing women were supposed to control: "eating in the European Middle Ages was stereotyped as a male activity and food preparation as a female one"; similarly, "'heavy' food, especially meat, was seen as more appropriate for men and lighter food for women, in part because meat had, for a thousand years, been seen as an aggravator of lust" (Bynum 1987: 191). That society made "even women in happy marriages often [feel] guilty about their sexuality [...]. Thus [...] some medieval women renounced food because of overpowering and deeply rooted fears of sexuality" (ibid, 215). Then, if the female saint was "in many ways the mirror image of society's notion of the witch", with equally great supernatural powers, whether good or evil, and "uncanny shrewdness" (ibid, 23), no wonder witches were regarded as voracious.

In both the romance and the ballad versions of "The Wedding of Sir Gawain" the loathly lady's own bewitched brother, the giant who captures

Arthur and forces him to find a way to solve the enigma of what women most desire, vows he will burn his sister if he can get hold of her. This does not happen because, by accepting her "maestrie", Gawain breaks the spell that affected brother and sister (a wicked stepmother had turned them into monsters). But before the fairy-tale ending, which might be said to prevent Dame Ragnell from having to be accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake, she manages to bring the Arthurian Court to its knees in a way that surpasses even Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

We may now understand Dame Ragnell's voracity as a challenge to Arthur's Court as an emblem of ideal secular culture and society. Not that grasping this is essential for enjoying the fun of her outrageous banquet before the appalled eyes of courtiers. But it helps us to better appreciate the comicality of Dame Gaynour (Queen Guinevere) and other ladies' efforts to convince Ragnell to have her wedding early in the morning, as privately as possible, and Ragnell's insistence on having the wedding announce throughout the shire *and* the banquet held in the open hall, amidst the whole court, taking the place of honour at the table. What Bakhtin argued about the image of the banquet in popular culture is stressed and enhanced when the diner is question is a woman like Dame Ragnell, and sitting at Arthur's stately table.

Dame Ragnell does not make a speech at the table. Her subversive discourse simply consists in eating wholesale:

This foulle lady began the highe dese;
She was fulle foulle and not curteis,
So said they alle verament.
When the service cam her before,
She ete as moche as six that ther wore;
That mervailid many a man.
Her nailes were long inches three;
Therwithe she breke her mete ungoodly;
Therfore she ete alone.
She ette three capons and also curlues three,
And great bake metes she ete up, perdé.
All men therof had mervaille.
Ther was no mete cam her before,
But she ete it up less and more,
That praty foulle dameselle.

Alle men then that evere her sawe
Bad the deville her bonis gnawe,
Bothe knighte and squire.
So she ete tille mete was done,
Tille they drewe clothes and had washen
As is the gise and manner. (Sands ed. 601-21).

She *is* the grotesque body in the flesh among an astonished masculine audience, perhaps even more carnal than Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who also likes a drop but who tends to wrap up her own "jolly body" in the body of anti-feminist texts her that her verbal discourse is trying to subvert. At the banquet, says Bakhtin (1987: 253), the body evades its own limits; it swallows, gulps, grubs, tears up the world, thrives and grows at its expense. While eating Ragnell swallows up society instead of being swallowed up by it as a woman. From Antiquity, in Bakhtin's analysis, the images of banquet had a foremost of importance in their universalism, that is, their especial bond with life, death, struggle, victory, triumph, renascence... In addition, Dame Ragnell's banquet celebrates her victory as a woman over her assigned duties to be ashamed of her fleshly nature, practise abstinence or at least moderation, and selflessly feed others.

As the banquet stands for the victory of life over death, like the wedding, it plays in popular works (or those which reflect popular culture) the same role as the coronation (Bajtin 1987: 254-5). So it does for Dame Ragnell, even though she fails to make it a communal celebration because they leave her alone, since no courtier can stand her table manners (see quotation above). Then, after banquet and wedding comes institutionalised married life, and what it the courtly Gawain to do with a wife like her? The social context demanded either her transformation or her dissapearance. She is transformed into a beautiful, tame wife ("In her life she grevid him nevere", line 823), and then she will disappear. The comic romance ends up in a bleak note: for Ragnell dies only five years later. Marriage must have killed her merry voracity. To paraphrase Bakhtin (1987: 255) just once more, in the truly popular work death never serves as a coronation, unless it is followed by a funeral banquet (as in the *Illiad*), because the end should always be pregnant with a new beginning. With its weird addition of a tragic ending the romance of The Wedding of *Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* brings to mind what, according to Lee Patterson (1991: 321), was also Chaucer's usual "practice of

articulating but finally containing the voice of political protest." In the end Dame Ragnell's resistance is incorporated into the hegemonic culture of the romance, which explains away her gluttony as witchcraft. Her ironic female self-assertion is dismissed as unnatural, black magic. Yet her grotesque last supper may be said to have been celebrated for centuries in oral culture with ballads like *King Henry*.

Rubén Valdés Miyares

Universidad de Oviedo

REFERENCES

Bajtin, M. 1987: *La Cultura Popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento*. Alianza, Madrid.

Blamires, A. ed. 1992: *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*. OUP, Oxford.

Burke, P. 1994: *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Revised reprint). Scolar Press, Aldershot, Hants.

Bynum, C. W. 1987: *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Child, F. J. ed. 1965 (1882): *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Vol. I. Dover, New York.

Happé, P. ed. 1985: *English Mystery Plays*. Penguin, London.

Kappler, C. 1986: *Monstruos, Demonios y Maravillas a Fines de la Edad Media*. Akal, Madrid.

Kinsley, J. ed. 1989: *William Dunbar: Poems*. University of Exeter, Exeter.

Lyall, R. ed. 1989: *Sir David Lindsay: Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. Canongate, Edinburgh.

Patterson, L. 1991: *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Routledge, London.

Sands, D. B. ed. 1986: *Middle English Verse Romances*. University of Exeter, Exeter.

Shaw, P. 1988: Loathly Ladies, Lither Ladies and Leading Ladies: the Older Woman in Middle English Literature. *Articles and Papers of the First International Conference of SELIM*. Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad, Oviedo.

* † *