*Dame Ragnell* and *The Greene Knight*

In the story of Dame Ragnell, King Arthur must discover what women desire most, in order to save his life from the knight Sir Gromer Somer Joure. The difficulty of this quest initially overwhelms Arthur, until his honorable nephew Sir Gawain offers to aid him in his mission. This presents the idea that even great men, such as King Arthur, need help from time to time, and also displays Gawain’s chivalrous loyalty to his uncle. Despite this, the two are unable to come up with matching answers, and Arthur finds himself subjected once again to the mercy of a stranger. The mysterious hag Dame Ragnell offers to give him the answer to the question, but only if she is allowed to marry Sir Gawain in exchange. Arthur bemoans this decision, not wanting to confine his loyal youth in marriage to such a hideous beast. This, again, underscores Arthurs dependence upon Gawain to get him out of a rather sticky situation, and offers him an opportunity to reflect upon his meekness. If he is to get out of this alive, his loved one will have to sacrifice for him. Thankfully for Arthur, Sir Gawain happens to be the embodiment of all things chivalrous, and will have to demonstrate his devotion to Arthur in order to learn a lesson of his own.

Once again Gawain proves his merit, happily offering to take Ragnell’s hand in marriage so that Arthur might live. This expresses both his deep loyalty to his Lord, and his ability to see beyond her less-than-impressive appearance. This act of allegiance allows Arthur to keep his head, but subjects Gawain to what should be a rather unhappy marriage, as Ragnell’s ghastly appearance and mannerisms should bring him nothing but misery. Indeed, Ragnell exhibits repulsive manners at the feast, causing some to shudder in horror. However, Gawain seems to stomach this behavior effectively, knowing it would be disrespectful to chastise his wife, and allows her to do as she pleases. However, by being married to a good knight, part of Ragnell’s curse is revealed to have been lifted - she will now appear in her natural beauty for half of the day, but resume her ugly form for the other half. This event bears important significance, as Gawain’s somewhat-acceptance of Ragnell on the surface level of marriage has resulted in the somewhat-removal of her curse. Upon offering Gawain the choice as to which half of the day she will be beautiful, he returns the decision to her hands, saying, “Evyn as ye wolle, I putt it in your hand… for I am bond; I putt the choyse in you.” (680-683) By neglecting his own wants and allowing Ragnell to choose for herself when she will be beautiful, Gawain shatters her curse permanently, causing her beauty to radiate both day and night. This overt rewarding of Gawain for his service, selflessness, and simple human understanding suggests that the audience, in addition to the characters in the story, are meant to exhibit these qualities.

The tale of Dame Ragnell offers the explicit notion that, “We [women] desyren of men above alle maner thyng, to have the soverynté, withoute lesyng, of alle, bothe hyghe and lowe.” (423-425)This servesas a vehicle for the primary lesson of the story. While Arthur explicitly learns that women desire the ability to choose above all, it is Gawain who exhibits an understanding of this, which allows Ragnell freedom from her curse. This yearning for sovereignty can be extrapolated to include not only women, but mankind as a whole. Ultimately, people are bound to their “appetites”, innate emotions that shape them to behave a certain way, and cause them to yearn for a specific thing. While some of these appetites can be satiated by tangible means - hunger being quelled by a delicious meal, or lust being sated by a romp in the hay - a universal social appetite reveals itself. Humans long to be accepted by others, and to be included in various social circles, regardless of their personality, appearance, or beliefs. Ragnell herself epitomizes this - cursed to be repulsive in form until she receives sovereignty in her marriage, she physically manifests the discomfort, pain, and sadness that comes with being socially ostracized. The omnipresence of these “appetites” equalizes men and women in *Dame Ragnell*, with Gawain and Ragnell eventually achieving a happy relationship upon recognition of *each other’s* desires. Contrast this to the tale of *The Greene Knight*, in which Morgan Le Fay, the Green Knight’s mother-in-law, and the Green Knight’s wife all *attempt* to exert some level of control. The marriage between the Green Knight and his wife is not a happy one, due to her incessant longing for the man she believes Sir Gawain to be. Her fantasizing about a man of legend causes her to become disenchanted by her real husband, whom she cannot shape at her will. As it was stressed in *Ragnell*, this sort of despairing relationship can never hope to function. Together, these stories show the importance of treating others with respect, honesty, and openness, and how these factor into maintaining a happy and functional relationship.

In *The Greene Knight*, Gawain is tricked into a game of head-chops with a mystical Green Knight, who has ventured to Camelot to test the mettle of King Arthur’s knights. Through sorcery the Green Knight endures his decapitation, shouting that Gawain must meet him in a years time for his turn to be beheaded. Though seemingly a death-sentence, this offers Gawain a chance to discover for himself the most base human appetite, the desire to live. Through his quest he learns that his chivalrous outlook on life should be malleable to a certain extent, especially when it comes to protecting his own existence. This manifests itself as fear of death when he meets the Green Knight at the Green Chapel; despite having made an oath to share all that he receives with the Lord of a neighboring castle, Gawain hides the lace of invincibility, given to him by the Lord’s wife. In this instance, Gawain’s typically honorable behavior is subverted by the lust to survive, causing him to “bend” his oath. The Green Knight himself denotes this as acceptable, claiming that he never intended to take Gawain’s head, recognizing that a man should do what he can to keep his life. Arthur and his Knights also excuse Gawain for his actions, despite them being sneaky, or even shameful. Instead, they rejoice and welcome their brother back, grateful that he lives at all. Though Gawain returns bearing the green girdle as a symbol of his shame and failure, his friends, too, don green girdles, proclaiming them to be a sign of honor. Gawain is offered the same acceptance he extended to Ragnell; his fellow knights know that he is still the same Gawain they know and love, and seek to comfort him as he undergoes a minor identity crisis.

The cheerful conclusions to these tales are meant to break the fourth wall, in a sense, and identify directly with the reader. In *The Greene Knight*, Gawain experiences firsthand the inescapable “appetite” for life, but is shown that this natural human compulsion does not disqualify him from being chivalrous. *Dame Ragnell* offers the idea that one should not impress his or her desires and expectations of someone else, but rather, embrace them for all of their faults, foibles, and flaws. In doing so, the social construction (relationship) between both parties grows - this is made abundantly clear by Ragnell’s overwhelming beauty that is revealed once she has been not only accepted, but encouraged to be who she wants to be.

The theme of acceptance, both of the self and of others, carries enormous weight in the present day. This is especially true on a college campus, where snap-judgements are made on a daily basis, lumping others into pre-existing categories based primarily upon his or her appearance. This allows for the individual to sink into the comforting category of the self, accepting like-minded and similarly dressed people while juxtaposing themselves against the various groups of “Others”. Value is not derived from who someone is, so much as who they are not. This form of categorization only servers to further social divides, empowering the act of stereotyping others instead of offering them a fair opportunity to prove their idiocy. After reading *Ragnell*, I realized that some of my best friends have emerged from groups I would typically dismiss, and have proven dead-wrong my immediate judgement of them. The fact of the matter is, one can’t accurately “gauge” a person in this manner; only through time and patience can someone’s true identity begin to surface. Additionally, both tales have shown me that one cannot force his or her expectations upon someone else within a relationship - doing so will yield only disappointment and frustration. A relationship should be assessed with this in mind; if I feel the need to try and change or alter a young woman’s beliefs or behaviors, perhaps she is not the right woman for me. Finally, I have realized that while codes of honor and chivalry may be easy to aspire to, I should not feel deeply troubled when I inevitably fail to live up to them. In Houston, Texas, a young man is expected to exhibit gentlemanly qualities to all in a social setting, especially his superiors. However, the far more relaxed atmosphere of Colorado has shown me that people get along just fine without the excessive politeness that I know simply as “southern hospitality”. These lofty standards are good to aim for, but should serve as guidelines rather than imperatives.