

# The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle

*anon*

*a late fifteenth century Middle English verse narrative in the  
Arthurian tradition*

Translated and retold in Modern English prose  
by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Thomas Hahn (Ed),  
1995. Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales. Medieval Institute  
Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. The story is taken from  
Oxford, Bodleian Library MS 11951.

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A close-up photograph of vibrant pink flowers, likely from a flowering branch, with soft lighting and a blurred background.

# The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle

anon  
*late fifteenth century*

**L**ythe and listenythe the lif of a lord riche · The while that he lyvid was none hym liche · Nether in bowre ne in halle – Sit back, everybody, and listen to what happened to a mighty lord. While he lived there was no man to equal him anywhere, for this adventure took place in the time of King Arthur and it concerns the king himself.

Chivalry was the guiding principle of King Arthur's land; he was courteous and regal and loved by all his knights. Listen to an adventure that happened once to King Arthur!

The king was hunting in Inglewood, near the mysterious and magical Lake Wathelene, in Cumbria, with all his knights, waiting for the beaters to flush out some deer. Carrying a bow, the king caught sight of a great stag and set off in pursuit. The hart entered a part of the forest that was thick with bracken and tried to conceal itself from the hounds, but the king knew where it was. 'Stay here!' he called to his knights, 'and I will practice my skills at stalking.' So the king took his bow in his hand and stooped down like a tracker. When he was very close to the stag, it darted forwards and ran off towards a thicket, but the king continued his pursuit.

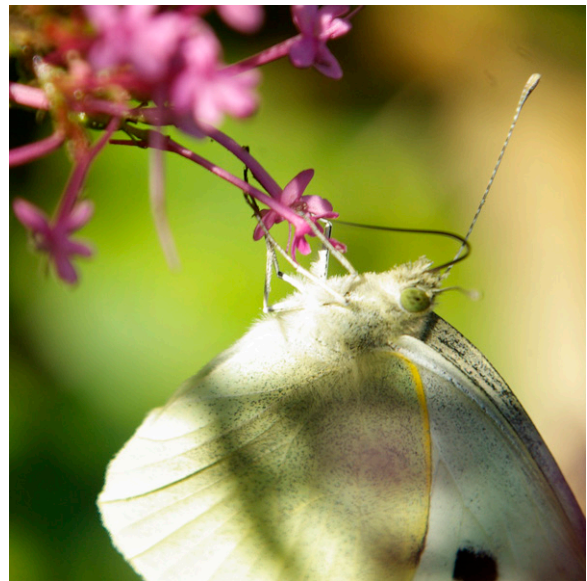
The chase went on like this for about half a mile, I should think, and no one dared to defy the king's instructions and to follow. At last the king let loose an arrow and hit the beast so accurately that it tumbled to the ground. It fell into a small hollow filled with ferns, and the king followed quickly. When he arrived he butchered the animal expertly.

And as he laboured alone, there came walking towards him an odd-looking knight, very well-armed and obviously a man of great strength. 'We are well met, King Arthur!' cried this knight. 'For many years you have wronged me and now I shall take my opportunity for revenge! What have you to say for yourself, king, in these, your final moments?'

'Sir knight,' replied the king, anxiously. 'Wait a moment! What is your name?'

'Sir king, my name is Summers-Day.

'Ah, Sir Summers-Day,' said the king, 'think carefully before you do anything regrettable. You will receive no honour if you kill me here. Remember that you are a knight!



Abandon this folly and follow a more reasonable course. If a miscarriage of justice has occurred I shall see to it that it is amended to your satisfaction, before we part. Sir Gawain may relinquish some of his lands to you.'

'No!' exclaimed Sir Summers-Day. 'By Heaven's King! You shall not escape so easily! I shall not let you go leaving me some vague promise that you will have no intention of keeping, once you are surrounded again by all your knights. I shall not fall into that trap!'

'If you will spare my life,' said the king, 'I will grant you whatever it is you desire. It would be a great dishonour for you to kill me like this while you are fully armed, and I am not.'

'You are wasting your breath!' cried Sir Summers-Day. 'I desire neither land nor gold but only that you shall do as I will explain, here on an appointed day, in a year's time, dressed exactly as you are now.'

'I agree to this,' said the king. 'Here is my hand.'

'Yes, but listen first to what I have to say. You will swear upon my sword to tell me when we next meet what it is that women most desire in all the world. I will not send for you but we will meet again at this very spot in exactly twelve months' time. And you will swear upon my sword that you will come unaccompanied, and that none of your knights will follow you. And if you have no satisfactory answer for me, I shall cut off your head. What do you say, King? Let me hear what you have to say. Tell me! Do you agree?'

'Sir, I agree to all this. Now let me go! Although it pains and angers me to make this promise, I swear that I will return to this spot in twelve months' time and give you your answer, as I am a true king.'

'Go, then, King Arthur! And be in no doubt that your life is in my hands. You do not know the trouble you are in. Wait. King Arthur, listen to this. Make sure that you do not trick me, and tell no one about our meeting, nor what has been said. And if you try to hunt me down today with your knights, be sure that you will be the first to be killed.'

'That will not happen,' assured the king. 'You will never see me break my word. I would rather die. Farewell Sir knight, and a curse that we have met!'

The king then blew his bugle. Every knight heard it and recognised it and they all hurried towards the sound. They found the king beside the deer. He looked depressed and out of sorts. 'Let us return to Carlisle,' he commanded. 'I am tired of hunting.' All the knights knew by his manner that something had happened which the king was not tell-

*The story of the wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle is found here and also in a sixteenth century manuscript lying in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It was perhaps originally composed in the late-fifteenth century. The underlying theme, however, was widespread throughout the late Middle Ages; its principal 'heroine' first appears in Chrétien de Troyes' story of Perceval and the Graal, and as the 'loathly lady' she made a dramatic appearance at one of the 'Round Tables' of King Edward I of England in 1299. The story of her presented here bears striking similarities to an ancient Irish tale of Diarmuid and Fionn mac Cumhaill, and is very similar also to a tale used by Geoffrey Chaucer as his Canterbury tale from the Wife of Bath. Curiously, from its closing lines the poem seems to have been composed by a man languishing in prison, and therefore under similar circumstances to Sir Thomas Malory.*

ing them about.

So the king returned to Carlisle, but no one could guess what it was that weighed down his spirit. He seemed depressed and anxious, and that evening Sir Gawain confronted his lord.

‘Sir, it is a wonder to us why you seem so unhappy.’

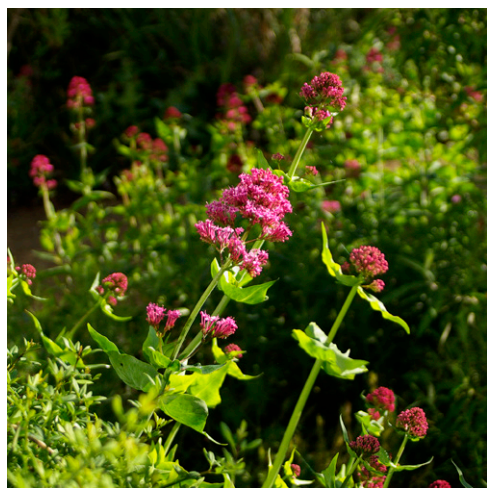
‘I will tell you,’ the king quickly replied. ‘When I was out in the forest this morning I met with a knight who spoke to me very badly and made me swear not to tell a soul what had passed between us. Therefore I must remain silent.’

‘I shall not betray your confidence to anybody,’ confided Gawain.

‘Well,’ said the king, ‘you know that I killed a great stag in Inglewood all alone. It was just after this that a knight approached me, an armed knight. His name is Sir Summers-Day. He threatened me and would have killed me, unarmed as I was, had I not appeased him. I had no armour on. Alas, my honour is now destroyed!’

‘How so?’ asked Sir Gawain.

‘What else do I need to tell you?’ replied the king. ‘He would have killed me and I had to put myself in his mercy! He made me swear that at the end of twelve months I will meet him again in that same place, unarmed and unaccompanied. I gave him my word on this. And I must tell him what it is that women most desire in all the world, and my



life rests upon the answer I give. I must return to that place dressed just as I was this morning, and if I give him the wrong answer, I shall be killed right there. He will cut off my head! Can you blame me if I seem a little despondent?’

‘Sir,’ replied Sir Gawain, ‘make your horse ready and gallop far and wide. Ask everyone you meet to advise you upon the answer to this question, and I shall ride similarly in another direction and get what I can from everybody I come across. I shall write it all down in a book.’

‘Sir Gawain,’ said the king. ‘This is good advice.’

Soon they were both ready. Gawain and the king. The king rode one way, Sir Gawain another, and each of them enquired of everyone they met, man, woman and child, what it is that women most desire. Some said they love fine clothes above everything else, others that women most liked to be highly praised. Some suggested that a lusty lover brought them the most pleasure. A few said one thing, others said another. Sir Gawain’s book was soon filled with different answers.

By the time he returned, Sir Gawain had filled a thick tome with responses to this ques-

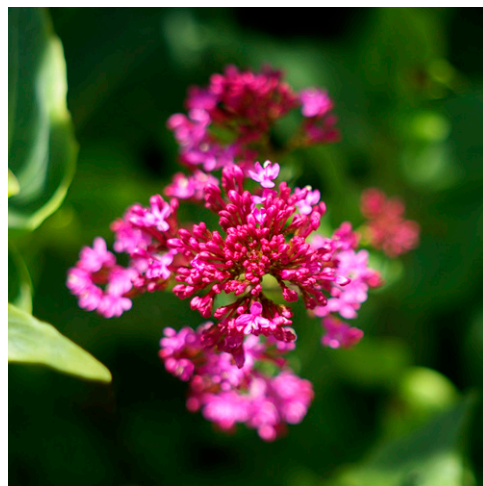


tion. By this time the king had also returned with a sheaf of answers. Each scrutinised the other's pages. 'The answer we are looking for is bound to be here somewhere,' said Sir Gawain, optimistically. But the king was not so convinced.

'I can see little hope of success in this,' he said. 'I shall search some more in Inglewood Forest. There is only a month left now and I may yet chance upon some useful advice.'

'Do as you see fit,' said Sir Gawain. 'I am sure you will come across something worthwhile in the forest.'

King Arthur set out the next day and took the path to Inglewood Forest. After a while he met with a lady. She was as ugly a creature as ever man saw. King Arthur could hardly bear to look at her! Her nose was running with snot, her teeth were yellow and her eyes were large and round. Her mouth was wide, she had teeth overhanging her bottom lip and her cheeks stuck out like a woman's hips. She had a long muscular neck, her hair was tangled in a mess against her scalp, she was a yard across at the shoulders and her breasts were so large and heavy that they alone were enough to weigh down her horse. Fully to describe the foulness of this lady is beyond mans' wit.



Her palfrey was gaily decked out – it had gold and gems upon its bridle. That such a horrible creature should ride upon such a fine horse! It was beyond all reason. She rode up to King Arthur and said: 'May God be with you, Sir King. I am pleased that we have met. It will be to your advantage if you speak with me a little before you go, for I warn you, your life is in my hands.'

'What do you want with me?' asked King Arthur.

'Sir, I wish to tell you something to your advantage. For all the answers that you may care to sing out, none of them will save your life! You must understand this. You may not believe that I know the predicament that you are in, but I assure you, I do. And if I do not help you, you are as good as dead. I ask only one thing in return, and for this I shall guarantee you your life; for without my help, you will lose your head to the axe.'

'Speak more clearly,' said the king. Explain yourself. Tell me at once, fair lady, why my life is in your hands.'

'I ask only that you find me a knight to marry,' replied this hideous damsel. 'His name is Sir Gawain. And in return, I shall pledge to you that the answer I shall disclose will save your life.'

'Mary! I cannot give you Sir Gawain just like that! Whom he chooses to marry is his own affair. But I will do the best I can to persuade him to save my life. I will tell him what

you have told me.'

'Well,' said the maiden, 'go home and speak with Sir Gawain, for your life depends upon it. Although I am ugly, I am happy and good-natured. I am not evil, and through me, Sir Gawain can save your life, or make certain of your death.'

'Alas!' cried the king. 'That I should have to ask Sir Gawain to marry you! For he will be loath to say 'no' I am sure, and I have never seen a woman so disgusting to look at as you anywhere.'



'Is it a problem, Sir king, that I am ugly? Doesn't an owl have to mate with another owl? That is all I have to say. When you come to give your answer, I will meet you here beforehand, for otherwise you are lost.'

'Farewell lady,' said the king.

'There is a bird that men call an owl, and yet I am a lady.'

'What is your name?'

'Sir king, my name is Dame Ragnelle, and I have never yet deceived anybody.'

'Goodbye, Dame Ragnelle!'

'Do not dally, Sir king, but make haste! I shall see you here again soon.'

So they parted amicably enough and the king soon came to Carlisle, though his heart was heavy indeed.

The first man he met was Sir Gawain.

'Sir, how have you got on?' he asked.

'Never so badly!' replied the king. 'Alas, I am on the point of ending it all. It seems that I have no way of avoiding death.'

'Heaven forbid!' exclaimed Sir Gawain. 'I would rather die myself, by Christ! This is awful.'

'Gawain, I met today with the ugliest and most hideous lady that I have ever seen. She told me that she would save my life, but I must first of all ask you to agree that you will be her husband. She told me her name, by the Cross – it is Dame Ragnelle. She said that unless I learned the answer from her, I would be lost. She told me this. And if her answer failed, she would not have her desire. This is the agreement she offered me. And if her answer saves my life, then she has you. This is all there is to it. This is the agreement. I lament it from the bottom of my heart.'

'Is that all?' asked Sir Gawain. 'I shall marry her and then marry her again, even if she

is a fiend, or Beelzebub himself! I will marry her, by the Holy Cross, or count myself your enemy! You are my king, the source of my honour, you have elevated me in many a battle and I shall not fail you now. It is my duty to save your life. Not to do so would be treachery and cowardice! Besides, my honour can only increase through such an act.'

'Gawain, thank you,' said the king. 'Of all my knights you are the finest I have ever known. You have saved my honour and my life. You shall enjoy my undivided love, as I am a true king.'

Six days later it was time for the king to travel back to Inglewood Forest to give his answer. The king and Sir Gawain rode out together. There was nobody else with them.

When the king was within the forest: 'Sir Gawain,' he said. 'Farewell, I must go west. You may accompany me no further.'

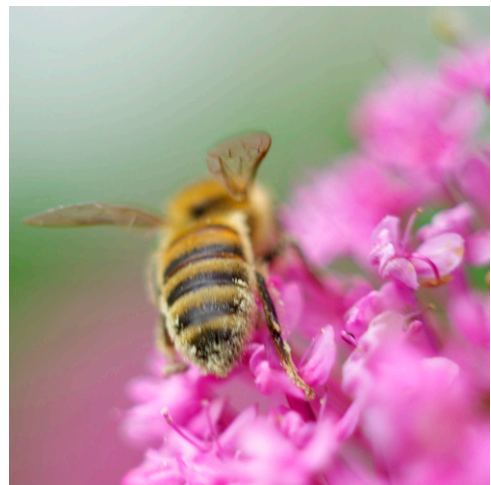
'My lord, Godspeed you on your journey. I wish I could ride with you, for it saddens me greatly to have to leave you.'

The king rode for only a little while, no more than a mile I think, when he met Dame Ragnelle. 'Ah, Sir king,' she cried, 'Welcome! I guess you are riding to deliver your answer? But it will be the wrong one. It will do you no good.'

'Then since there is no other way,' said the king, 'tell me your answer. You shall marry Sir Gawain. He has promised me that this shall be so, in order to save my life. You shall have your desire, both in public and in bed. Therefore, tell me quickly – what is the answer that will save my life? Hurry, for I don't have much time.'

'Sir' replied Dame Ragnelle, 'you shall now learn what a women most desires, whether she be a duchess or a scullery maid. Some men say that we want to be thought beautiful, others that we desire to have dealings with as many men as possible; some say that we most desire an athletic lover, or simply to be married. Some say that we like to be praised highly – but you men butter us up with complements only so that you may slide your way into us all the more easily! This is all foolish and superficial. There is only one thing that we all truly desire, and now I shall tell you what it is. We desire of men, above everything else, that we shall be their masters! We desire sovereignty over them. For when we are in control, all is ours, though our knight may be the most feared in battle. Above all else, we wish to have control and sovereignty over the most valiant and courageous men. And to achieve this is our highest art, and our most envied skill. Duchess or servant, this is every woman's most fervent desire.

'Therefore, Sir king, follow this path and tell that knight what I have just told you – that power is what women most desire. He will be angry. He will curse the woman who



revealed this secret to you. But he will have to concede that his labour has been in vain. Go forth, Sir king, as you have sworn you will, and have no fear. Your life is safe.'

The king galloped off, across marsh and heath, towards the place that had been appointed. Sir Summers-Day was waiting there.

'Dismount, Sir king, and let me hear your answer,' he cried, sternly.



The king pulled out his two books: 'The answer will be in these, somewhere, I am sure,' he said. The knight leafed through every page. 'No! No! Sir king, you are a dead man! Bend down and bow your neck!'

'Wait! Sir Summers-Day,' cried King Arthur. 'I have another answer!'

'What is it?'

'By God who helps us all, I can see that you have but little gentility. Here is my answer. Women desire sovereignty. This is what women desire most of all.

This is the source of their greatest pleasure. Their greatest ambition is to rule over the strongest and the most valiant of men. This is what they all hope for and this is what I have been instructed to tell you, Sir Summers-Day.'

'And she who told you this, Sir Arthur, I pray to God that I may see her burning on a fire! For that was my sister Dame Ragnelle, may God send her shame! For otherwise I would have had you, King Arthur, I would have tamed you! Now I have laboured in vain. Go where you wish. You have nothing further to fear from me. A curse on this day! I shall never be this close to killing you ever again.'

'Be assured of that!' said the king. 'You shall never come across me unarmed again.'

'Have a good day,' said Sir Summers-Day.

'Farewell!' cried King Arthur. The king turned his horse and galloped off, and soon he came to the heath where Dame Ragnelle was standing. 'Sir king,' she said, 'I am pleased that things have turned out alright. I told you they would. Now hold to your promise.'

'Be in no doubt, lady, that I shall keep my word. If you do as I instruct, your desires shall be fulfilled in due course.'

'No, Sir king!' cried Dame Ragnelle. 'I must be married immediately! The ceremony must be open and proclaimed. Ride on, Sir King Arthur, and I will follow.'

The king saw that he had an obligation and very little choice, and so they rode together until they came to Carlisle. She rode eagerly into the court beside the king. Everybody wondered where she had come from, this grotesque hag, and the king was very unhappy with the whole affair.



‘King Arthur,’ she said, ‘send for Sir Gawain, quickly, while all your knights are assembled, so that our wedding can be proclaimed without any delay. You have promised me this. Let me see my love Sir Gawain, immediately.’

Sir Gawain was fetched. ‘Sir, I am ready to fulfil everything that I have promised,’ he said to King Arthur. Sir Gawain gave his word to marry her, come what may, upon his knighthood. Dame Ragnelle was visibly delighted.

‘Alas!’ exclaimed Queen Guinevere, and all the ladies in her chambers echoed her dismay. They wept for Sir Gawain.

The day of the wedding arrived. Queen Guinevere tried to persuade Dame Ragnelle: ‘For God’s love, hold the ceremony early in the morning and as privately as possible.’

‘No!’ she replied. ‘By heaven’s King! I shall not! Not for all the world shall I do as you say! I shall be married openly, for I have the king’s word on this. Be in no doubt, I shall not come to church until it is time for High Mass. And I will dine afterwards in the main hall amongst all the knights and the nobility.’

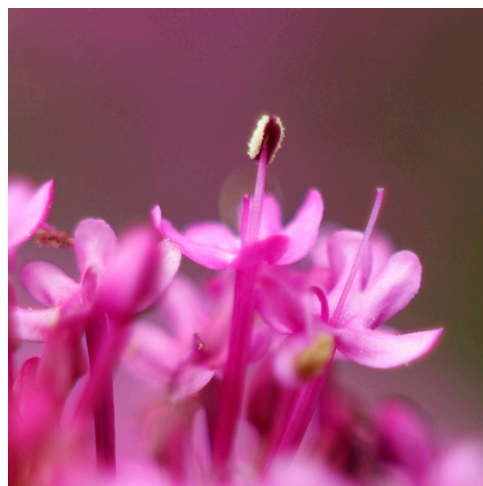
‘As you wish,’ said Queen Guinevere, resignedly. ‘I was thinking only of you.’

So Dame Ragnelle made herself ready to go to the church, and all the knights of King Arthur’s realm made themselves ready also. Dame Ragnelle was dressed in the finest clothes that money could buy, finer even than Queen Guinevere’s. Her gown was worth three thousand gold marks! They were married, and she and Sir Gawain went back to the hall for the wedding feast. This grotesque lady sat in the highest place on the top table, but her etiquette was noticeable by its absence! When the courses were brought, she gobbled them down, eating as much as six knights could consume. Her fingernails were three inches long, and she soon had empty places all around her.

She ate three chickens, three curlews, and three huge pies. Nothing was brought before her which she did not consume at once. Everybody stared at her, and privately invited the devil to gnaw upon *her* bones! Thus she rooted about the table until the meal was over. Then the tablecloths were removed and water was brought so that everybody could wash, as was the custom.

The time has come for Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle to consummate their marriage.

‘Ah, Sir Gawain, since I am now your wife,’ said this hideous creature as they lay together, ‘show me courtesy in bed. It is my right and you may not deny me. I know, Sir Gawain, that if I was beautiful you would be acting in another way entirely on this your



wedding night. Yet for King Arthur's sake kiss me at least; I ask you this. Then let us see what may develop.'

Sir Gawain turned over to face her and saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, looking back at him. 'What do you desire?' she asked.

'Jesus! What are you?' Sir Gawain exclaimed.

'Sir, I am your wife,' she replied. 'Why do you stare at me?'

'Lady, I apologise. Forgive me! It is a shock! You are a beautiful woman, and yet today you were the most disgusting sow that I had ever set my eyes upon. I am delighted to see you transformed.' He clasped her in his arms and kissed her, and there was much joy between them, be certain of this!

'Sir,' she said, 'before we make love, I must tell you that you have two options: choose one of them, for my beauty cannot last. Either I can be beautiful during the night and ugly during the day, or I can be foul beyond belief while we are alone at night, and attractive during the day. You must choose one or the other of these. The decision is yours.'

'Alas!' cried Sir Gawain. 'This is an impossible choice! There is heartbreak either way. The one leaves me open to ridicule and humiliation. But if you are beautiful only during the day, think what distress and disappointment I shall suffer every evening, when it is time to go to bed! I would gladly choose the best option, but I have no idea which it is. You must do as you see fit, my lady. I pass the decision back into your hands. You decide for us which is best. And all that is mine is yours, to do with as you wish, I vow this before God.'

'Thank you, courteous knight,' replied Dame Ragnelle. 'God bless you foremost amongst all knights, for now that I have been honoured, I shall be beautiful both day and night, for as long as I live. So do not grieve. I was transformed by black magic, by witchcraft, and was cursed to remain in that hideous shape until I had married the finest knight in England, and he had given me sovereignty over himself and all his possessions. Under this spell I was turned into that horrible creature and you, Sir knight, courteous Sir Gawain, have given me the sovereignty I needed. It shall not work out to your disadvantage, I assure you! Kiss me, Sir knight, right now. Be happy!'

Soon, they made love together, as was natural, alone in their bed on their wedding night. Dame Ragnelle thanked God and his mother Mary that the spell had been lifted. And so did Sir Gawain! He thanked our Saviour many times that night, I can tell you!

No sleep was had by them at all, and when dawn broke, Dame Ragnelle wished to get out of bed.

'No!' exclaimed Sir Gawain. 'We shall have a lie in and sleep for a few hours, and then let the king call us down to the midday meal. So they slept until it was nearly noon.'

‘Sirs,’ said the king, as the tables were being set, ‘let us go and see if Sir Gawain is still alive. I am afraid for him and want to make sure that that fiend hasn’t killed him. We will go and wake them up and make sure that he is alright.’

So they climbed the stairs up to Sir Gawain’s and Dame Ragnelle’s room, not knowing what to expect.

‘Wake up!’ cried the king through the locked door. ‘Sir Gawain! Why are you still in bed?’

‘Mary!’ exclaimed Sir Gawain, ‘Sir king, I would be grateful if you could go away! I am very tired. But wait! I will unlock the door and show you why I am still in bed!’

Sir Gawain arose, took his lady by the hand and hurried to the door. As he opened it, King Arthur caught sight of a beautiful woman in her nightgown standing by the fire. Her auburn hair hung to her knees. ‘This is why I am so tired!’ said Sir Gawain, boastfully.

This is all I have to say. Dame Ragnelle was the fairest lady in all England, as I understand. This was King Arthur’s opinion, at least. So here ends this adventure of King Arthur, who was often beset by strange adventures. It happened in Cumbria, while King Arthur was out hunting. Now God, as you were born in Bethlehem, don’t let their souls burn in hell. And Jesus, born of the virgin, help out of his sorrow the man who wrote down this tale, and do it quickly, for he is beset by jailors in a very strong prison! They hold him here unjustly through deceit and subterfuge. Now God, as you are a royal king, help out of danger the man who set this story down, for he has been in peril for a long time. Through your great pity, help your servant. I yield both my body and my soul into your hands, for both are in great danger.