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The Medieval Body is not a Passive Entity: The Body as an Imaginative Landscape in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and 'The Tale of Iphis and Ianthe'

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'Was the loathly lady always a woman, or was she a beast until the knight reinstated her [womanhood?]' (Williams 58)

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle and Gower's 'The Tale of Iphis and Ianthe' fascinate themselves with bodily transformation, and how the social order grapples with existences that occupy the spaces between categories, or refute categorisation at all. In these tales of romance, the medieval body is not merely a passive entity but a site by which social existence is determined; to step into a body is to assume its role, the outside is an encapsulation of the inner self. Yet, by further examining the liminal spaces that exist within these poems' monstrous bodies, and the idea of bodily transformation that underpins both tales, it is evident that beyond replicating social existences, the medieval body exists as an imaginative space. From uncertainty and contradiction, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and 'The Tale of Iphis and Ianthe' reimagine the body as a canvas for thinking, with the creative potential to explore the undefined and transcend the boundaries of social existence.

The medieval body is imbued with meaning, its presentation taken as a signifier of a particular social existence. *Ragnelle* opens with a confirmation of courtly assumptions, Arthur's introduction instilling him with the righteousness supposed of a king as the hendiadys 'curteys and royalle' (line 6) exemplifies his excess of knightly qualities. He is the gilded reflection of an idealised aristocracy, the grandest of all knights who 'berythe the flower' (7), and whose reign has brought his country 'nothyng butt chivalry' (10). To possess a body is to fulfil its social existence, to embody the characteristics it demands ahead of personal desires, and it is of this social principle that Arthur reminds Sir Gromer in their confrontation. Encountering Sir Gromer whilst alone in the Inglewood, Arthur learns that he has insulted him by giving part of his lands to Gawain. Though Sir Gromer desires revenge, to kill Arthur unarmed would defile his honour, so that 'alle knyghtes wolle refuse the,' and 'shame shall nevere the froo' (68, 69). He is beholden to the code of the knightly body, and to disregard this would further be to challenge the dominant social structure. This understanding

is what makes Ragnelle appear as a particularly 'unsemely syghte' (249). She is hideously monstrous in appearance, and yet still a 'Dame' (320) with the romantic desires of a courtly lady, sat astride 'a palfray … with gold besett and … precious stone' (247, 248). She assumes the aristocratic social existence without its expected bodily reflection. Williams highlights this disarray within the loathly lady trope as creating a fascinating predicament in which the knight's 'compulsion is dual' (57), as while her nature repels him, its complexity simultaneously compels him to chivalrous behaviour. Ragnelle's existence perplexes the systematic relationship between body and social existence, as she makes possible the occupation of two conflicting identities.

Gower's 'Iphis and Ianthe' navigates a world under this same assumption. Opening with Ligdus' declaration that, if born a daughter, his child should be 'forlore / And slain' (lines 455, 456), the poem reveals how the body is invested with an innate social value. Yet, Gower presents a subversive interpretation of the medieval body's relationship to identity, for if the outside is truly reflective of one's identity, then alterations to appearance may allow a degree of movement between modes of being. As such, when 'clothed and arraid / … as a kinges sone' (472, 473), Iphis is able to take on this social existence. Unlike Ragnelle, this existence between the bounds of social models is not regarded as unsightly, and further, Lochrie argues that 'all sorts of odd coincidences seem to conspire with the mother's deceit' (*Gower's Riddles* 81). Iphis is endowed with a gender-neutral name, referred to throughout the poem with solely masculine pronouns, and fulfils the social function of a son when betrothed to a duke's daughter. Writing on gender performance, Butler suggests that 'what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts' (XV), a concept which can be applied to Gower's understanding of identity as 'defined primarily by what is displayed, not what is essential' (Williams 71). The medieval body is

generative of social existence, yet this reliance on appearance naturally creates a space through which contradictions of identity can emerge, and the social system thus undermined.

Examining the components of these poems' monstrous bodies exposes the cultural values that determine them an abomination to nature. Cohen's *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* frames the monster as 'pure culture' (4), a representation of the outside or in between, embodying through their 'uncanny independence' (4) a warning against the 'borders that cannot—must not be crossed' (13). Particularly relevant to *Ragnelle* and 'Iphis and Ianthe' is Cohen's idea of the monster's 'double narrative' (13); their monsters are the product of an unfamiliar fluidity, containing both horror and desire. When he first encounters her in the forest, Arthur's initial description of Ragnelle's appearance immediately places her beyond the bounds of humanity. She is 'not simply extreme but unearthly' (Aguirre 276), an embodiment of the Bakhtinian grotesque as the synecdoche of 'tethe … mowithe … bak … nek' (233, 239) constructs her monstrosity limb by limb. A misshapen romantic heroine, her hyperbolic 'chekys syde as wemens hippes' (237) and 'hangyng pappys to be an hors lode' (242) craft a cultural reflection of the female monster that emphasises desirability's centrality to medieval womanhood, in this ridiculing image of a comically undesirable woman. Analysing the uncomfortable visual comedy of this scene, Niebrzydowski assesses that the deformity of Ragnelle's 'mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle,' (233) symbolises an ungoverned appetite, a greed 'reviled by an Arthurian court that considered itself emblematic of all things civilized' (97). This quality weaves itself throughout the poem, culminating in Ragnelle and Gawain's wedding feast. Though she sits within a courtly scene, Ragnelle's appetite remains unrestrained; she 'breke her mete ungoodly' (line 609), consuming 'as moche as six' with 'nayles,' (606, 608) more redolent of the claws of a beast. While Steinberg reads Ragnelle's monstrous body as an attack on the 'nouveaux riches' (10), I interpret her existence as manifesting from an anxiety of fluidity, or as Miller frames it,

‘ambiguities incommensurable with the conceptual boundaries that structure dominant systems of knowledge’ (136). Ragnelle’s body, containing both the womanly and the beastly, rests on the bounds of the indefinable. She wanders freely between the untamed forest and controlled courtly landscapes, makes demands of the aristocracy, and indulges her desires unrestrained; she is the embodiment of an existence both feared and desired.

It is Iphis’ desire for Ianthe, ‘this “monstrous love” that has been arranged for her’ (*Same-Sex Love* 84), that Ovid’s original tale deems the monster. Believing this desire to go against the rules of nature, Iphis prays to Isis to amend the pain of this mad love, and is thus transformed into a man. Gower’s interpretation reframes this love, suggesting instead that the unknown, rather than purely monstrous, can also be natural. The youthful love between Iphis and Ianthe appears innocent and naturalised as they lie ‘ofte abedde … sche and sche’ (478, 479). This desire that rests within the body of Iphis, akin to Ragnelle, exists on the borders, an encapsulation of Cohen’s definition of the monster as simultaneously feared but craved. Yet, there is no lament, no struggle, as ‘Nature’ (484) herself encourages Iphis and Ianthe to ‘use / Thing which to hem was al unknowe’ (486, 487). Their love is not only natural but exemplary, harnessed by Genius in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* as a lesson of ‘grete love’ (489). Addressing the role of nature within ‘Iphis and Ianthe’, Walker argues that the poem unveils how ‘nature is actually subjected to interpretation and fashioned by culture’ (Walker 213), a barricade placed to reinforce cultural boundaries. As Cohen declares, the ‘laws of nature … are gleefully violated in the … compilation of the monster’s body’ (7), and yet, Gower suggests that such transgression is perhaps not monstrous at all. For the body, beyond existing as a passive entity, is a natural template for creating and exploring identity.

Rather than merely replicating social existences, the transformations of *Ragnelle* and ‘Iphis and Ianthe’ address the medieval body as an imaginative landscape, a platform by which people are capable of considering existences beyond dominant boundaries. On their

wedding night, the reveal of Ragnelle's beautiful form comes with a question: would Gawain rather have a wife 'fayre on nyghtes [or] … on days' (660, 662), could he accept a wife that possesses two existences. In the tradition of the loathly lady trope, it is when he offers her 'sovereynté' (698), the greatest courtesy, that she is ultimately transformed and rid of her monstrosity. If read idealistically, this could perhaps appear as Ragnelle's victory. Yet, the dominant critical discourse argues otherwise; this transformation is a condemnation of her liminality, one that resigns her to conformity. She is now a traditional romantic heroine, 'his fayr Lady' (741), dressed daintily 'in her smok,' with her hair sensually 'to her knees as red as gold' (743, 744). As she swears herself to 'be obaysaunt' (785), Forste-Grupp argues that Ragnelle 'relinquishes her newly won sovereignty […] thus becoming a conventional heroine of medieval romance—silent, passive, and beautiful' (118). Having commented on *Ragnelle's* visual comedy, Niebrzydowski contends that 'with the disappearance of her tusks … her mouth has regained its potential for both the civilized ingestion of food and the fulfilment of its erotic possibilities' (98)—the perfect end can only come when her body, and thus the social order, has been restored. While the transformation in *Ragnelle* acts to reaffirm the limitations of social existence, the tale still raises questions about the relationship between the body and identity. 'Was the loathly lady always a woman, or was she a beast until the knight reinstated her [womanhood?]' (Williams 58). These are the questions that surround Ragnelle's narrative of transformation and emphasise the medieval body's potential as a landscape through which to consider complex identities.

The bodily transformation in 'Iphis and Ianthe' could be understood this same way, as Iphis is transformed into a man and his relationship with Ianthe thus permitted to remain. Indeed, the poem addresses 'the lore / Of that nature in kinde hath sett' (494, 495), acknowledging the transformation as necessary to make the love 'accordant to nature' (498). Yet, this reading is too simple, and disregards the 'series of paradoxes' (81) embedded within

Gower's tale. Gower harnesses the body as an imaginative landscape, an environment by which to create a riddle that 'does not necessarily ask to be solved' (Lochrie *Gower's Riddles* 86). Iphis and Ianthe are confronted with the difficulty of what Walker determines 'comprehending a nameless desire' (205); they are compelled by nature to explore a desire and affection resting within their bodies that remains outside of their understanding. In this manner, while Gower does not offer answers to his questions, he is able to 'imagine a desire for a knowledge of lesbianism, as well as for a language in which to embody it' (Walker 207). The laws of nature are themselves rife with contradiction, for as Lochrie identifies, 'nature teaches them to act on their desire and nature demands Iphis become a man' (*Gower's Riddles* 91); Iphis is awarded natural love with this transformation, and yet it is a love he already possessed. Uncertainty, Gower appears to say, is intrinsic to both the medieval body and the laws that govern it. It is ultimately by utilising the medieval body as an imaginative landscape, and contemplating ways of being that rest outside of dominant social existences, that it is possible to 'build a radical new possibility out of that uncertainty' (*Gower's Riddles* 84).

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle and Gower's 'The Tale of Iphis and Ianthe' recognise that the medieval body is not a passive entity, but a means by which social existence is determined. Yet within this systematic relationship, these poems confront existences that lie beyond the borders, seeking to understand how they come to be, and what contradictory components comprise their being. The medieval body is capable not only of recreating pre-existing social existences but ultimately exists as a creative landscape, in which the consideration of the contradictory and undefined can craft existences that transgress existing limitations.

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