

WEDDING SPELL

(Adapted from Bullfinch's
story "Gawain's Marriage")

by

Wayne Peter Liebman

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1315 Malcolm Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90024
310.475.5278
wpl@aya.yale.edu

Cast of Characters

<u>Arthur</u>	King of Britain
<u>Guinivere</u>	Arthur's Queen
<u>Gawain</u>	A knight of the court
<u>Sagramour</u>	A knight of the court
<u>Dame Ragnell</u>	A loathly lady
<u>The Foul Knight</u>	An obstreperous ruffian

The ensemble (minimum six--see below) also plays various town and country folk, knights and ladies of the court.

Scene

The English countryside. The court of King Arthur.

Time

Time out of mind.

Notes

The action of the play is continuous, without pauses or blackouts between scenes.

Accents: Dame Ragnell speaks with a Cockney accent. When she assumes her real identity, she speaks in standard English. The Foul Knight has a French accent.

Suggested Roles for a Cast of Six

Actress 1: Guinivere, Peasant #1

Actress 2: Dame Ragnell, Lady #1

Actor 1: Arthur

Actor 2: Gawain

Actor 3: Sagramour, Peasant #2

Actor 4: The Foul Knight, Lady #2, Old Woman

Scene 1

SETTING: King Arthur's court.

AT RISE: The cast in court finery, entering on their lines.

GUINIVERE
(to audience)
There once was king named Arthur.

ARTHUR
Arthur.

SAGRAMOUR
Who had many brave--

GAWAIN
Knights.

GUINIVERE
And whose castle was the seat of order--

LADY #2
culture--

LADY #1
and prosperity in the realm.

(A sudden burst of laughter as
ENSEMBLE comes to life.)

SAGRAMOUR
(drunkenly)
Gawain! Tell the one about the sheep farmer and his three daughters!

GAWAIN
I can't tell that in front of the ladies.

SAGRAMOUR
Aw, go on! Don't be such a priss.

ENSEMBLE WOMEN
Yes, please, Gawain. Tell us. Do tell. Tell us. Etc.

GAWAIN
Well--

ARTHUR
It was apparent to all. Gawain had quite a way with the ladies.

GUINIVERE

He's very handsome, you must agree.

LADY #1

He can really tell a story!

LADY #2

Oh do go on, Gawain!

GAWAIN

It seems there was once a farmer who had--

(SOUND: **A sudden knock at the castle door**, loud and ominous.)

GUINIVERE

What can that be?

ARTHUR

(majestically)

The door to Arthur's castle is always open.

(A tattered WOMAN rushes in and throws herself at ARTHUR'S feet.)

OLD WOMAN

Mercy, lord! Mercy!

ARTHUR

Up my good woman, up! What's the matter?

OLD WOMAN

(suppressing tears)

A foul knight is laying waste to our lands, killing all who oppose him! Help us, sir. Send us one of your knights to defeat him.

GAWAIN

I'll go! Let me go, my liege!

SAGRAMOUR

I'll do it. Send me, m'lord!

ARTHUR

All right. Sagramour--no. Gawain--oh, I'll go myself.

WOMAN

Sire, it is a very dangerous knight. They say he possesses a charm.

(Excalibur grows heavy. **ARTHUR struggles, sinks with the weight, drops the sword.**)

ARTHUR

What is happening?

FOUL KNIGHT

Does not your hand grow numb and weary?

ARTHUR

Pain! Can't breathe!

FOUL KNIGHT

You are my slave, King Arthur. Fetch wood for my fire!

(**ARTHUR'S** body moves jerkily to the Foul Knight's commands, racing about.)

ARTHUR

(to audience)

And so Arthur became the Foul Knight's slave.

FOUL KNIGHT

Cook my supper!

(ARTHUR cooks.)

Clean my gargoyles!

(ARTHUR cleans.)

Empty my chamber pot!

(A chamber pot in the face.)

Ha! Ha! Ha!

ARTHUR

Until one day, Arthur could stand it no longer.

(to the FOUL KNIGHT)

Sir knight, will you not accept a ransom for my freedom?

FOUL KNIGHT

What use have I for money, pasty weed?

ARTHUR

Then tell me what you want. I will do anything if you let me go.

FOUL KNIGHT

Anything? Very well, then bring me the answer to a riddle within a year and a day. And if you bring none, then you answer with your life.

ARTHUR

Riddle? I love riddles. What is it? Tell me!

FOUL KNIGHT

It is this: what is it women most desire to have? Bring me the true answer, Arthur, or a year and one day hence, you forfeit your life.

(HE exits.)

Scene 3

LIGHT SHIFT. Knights and ladies appear.

ENSEMBLE

Arthur! Thank heavens! You're safe. We were so worried. What happened? Tell us! Etc.

GUINIVERE

Are you all right, my husband?

ARTHUR

I must answer a riddle.

ENSEMBLE

Ohhh. Charades?

ARTHUR

What is it women most desire to have?

SAGRAMOUR

That's easy.

(HE makes an obscene gesture.)

A hard man is good to find, eh?

ENSEMBLE

No! Wrong! You're a pig. That can't be it. Etc.

LADY #1

I know. Children!

GAWAIN

A husband?

GUINIVERE

Respect?

SAGRAMOUR

Flattery!

LADY #2

Jewelry?

LADY #1

Happiness?

ARTHUR

Enough! I'm afraid none of these will satisfy the Foul Knight. And if I don't have the true answer in a year and a day, I forfeit my life.

ENSEMBLE

Ohhh!

GAWAIN

You must wander the kingdom in disguise, asking all you meet.

ARTHUR

You speak aright. Adieu, my queen. If I do not return in a year and a day, you are free to seek the hand of another, for I will be dead.

GUINIVERE

(stricken)

Arthur!

GAWAIN

I'll go with you, my king.

ARTHUR

Thank you, Gawain, truest of knights. I have done this to myself. I go alone. Farewell.

ENSEMBLE

Goodbye. Farewell. Auf weidersein. So long. Namaste. Das vedanya. Etc.

(THEY quickly disappear.)

Scene 4

Arthur dons a disguise--two fingers over the lip for a mustache, a V under the chin for a beard. The ENSEMBLE remove themselves. LIGHT SHIFT. ARTHUR wanders. HE encounters a pair of peasants.

ARTHUR

And so, donning a disguise, Arthur sought out the wisdom of his people.

PEASANT #1

Hello Ducky, what's this? Can you spare a tuppence?

ARTHUR

(a disguised voice)

If you can tell me what it is women most desire to have.

PEASANT #1

Oh, that's a new one. What do you think, Bess?

PEASANT #2

I think he needs a bath. Ha ha!

PEASANT #1

Oh, be serious, Bess, can't you see he's a gentleman? All right sir, I'll tell you. What a woman wants most is to be a wife.

PEASANT #2

Or to be a widow, more like! Ha ha.

PEASANT #1

That is good, Bess, that is good. Touché, as they say. Touché. Ah, fare the well, sir. No tuppence today, I can see that in your eyes. Ah, well. Come along, Bess. We're not wanted here.

(The PEASANTS exit.)

ARTHUR

(to audience)

And so it went. For a year Arthur wandered, and heard many an answer, that a woman most wanted

ENSEMBLE VOICES

(off stage)

Fame!

Riches!

Wisdom!

A son!

A daughter!

No! That's wrong!

(An argument ensues.)

ARTHUR

(waving silence)

and a thousand more things, but none satisfied. Until the king despaired of ever hearing the true answer, and knew he must forfeit his life. So with heavy heart he at last turned toward the Foul Knight's castle, and soon found himself in a dark wood.

Scene 5

LIGHT SHIFT to **night**. The ENSEMBLE become TREES; they hold branches.

Some mist would be nice. SOUNDS: Eerie music. Owl & other forest sounds. Distant thunder, rain. **A dimly lit figure appears--RAGNELL.** SHE looks upstage. Is she humming to herself? ARTHUR approaches. He can't make out her face.

ARTHUR

Who is that there? I can't quite see you. Turn around and show yourself.

(RAGNELL ignores HIM.)

Gentle woman, are you not afraid to be alone in these woods this night?

(RAGNELL suddenly shrieks and cackles, reveals her hideous countenance, for which the actor may distort her face.)

SOUND: A sudden thunderclap, a shocking chord. LIGHTS: a flash of lightening. The effect should be horrifying. RAGNELL speaks in an ancient, cracked voice, the voice of a sybil.)

DAME RAGNELL

And of whom should I be afraid, Arthur?

(ARTHUR turns away, breathless and reeling at her ugliness. HE tries to run away but the TREE branches stop his flight.)

Will you not speak with me?

ARTHUR

Most...terrible witch!

DAME RAGNELL

What's that you say?

ARTHUR

I said--

DAME RAGNELL

I thought I heard you call me witch. Think you I am ugly?

ARTHUR

Yes--did I say that? I meant no.

DAME RAGNELL

A politician's answer. I have summoned you here. You have nothing to fear from me.

DAME RAGNELL (cont'd)
Though you go to your death if you do not make true answer to a certain question. Am I not right? Speak!

ARTHUR
But how--

DAME RAGNELL
I have two ears. Now, Arthur, speak truly. What is it that women most desire?

ARTHUR
I cannot tell you.

DAME RAGNELL
Though I can tell you, if you grant my wish.

ARTHUR
You know the answer? Say it. Anything in my power. I grant it.

DAME RAGNELL
Come hither.
(SHE signals the TREES to release ARTHUR.)
Be quick.
(ARTHUR, barely containing his revulsion and fear, approaches her. Her odor is foul.)
Know this. What a woman most wants is her will. Nothing more nor less than to be sovereign to herself. As for what I desire, come closer.

(HE hesitates.)
Closer I say!
(SHE whispers in his ear.
SOUND: Thunder. Lightning.)
Now go. You have an appointment to keep.
(SOUND: Thunder. Lightning.
RAGNELL exits laughing like a Banshee. The TREES echo her.)

ARTHUR
Do not ask this of me!
(But SHE has disappeared.)
There's not a king in the world who could command such a thing. What have I done?

Scene 6

LIGHT SHIFT. Day. The storm has passed. Bird song. ARTHUR is at the FOUL KNIGHT'S castle. The FOUL KNIGHT and GARGOYLES appear.

FOUL KNIGHT

So. You are back. You owe me an answer. Have you one?

ARTHUR

I have a thousand.

FOUL KNIGHT

Good, let's hear them all! I need a laugh.

ARTHUR

It's said what a woman most desires is a husband--
(The FOUL KNIGHT roars with
laughter through the
following:)

FOUL KNIGHT

Oh, this is good.

ARTHUR

A child.

FOUL KNIGHT

Who made you king?

ARTHUR

Riches.

FOUL KNIGHT

Stop! You're killing me!

ARTHUR

Honor.

FOUL KNIGHT

You took a year for this?

ARTHUR

Beauty.

FOUL KNIGHT

So, you have no answer at all? Prepare to die.
(HE pantomimes drawing a sword
and is poised to strike:)

ARTHUR

I have one more, though I am loathe to use it.

FOUL KNIGHT

Well?

(HE tosses the sword from one
hand to the other.)

ARTHUR

Know this: the thing a woman most desires to have is her will. Nothing more nor less than to be sovereign to herself.

FOUL KNIGHT

What? Miscreant! It was my sister that told you this! Half-faced strumpet! Fen-sucking dragon! I am undone! Aarrgggh!
(Exits shouting, perhaps using his weapon on a GARGOYLE in frustration.)

ARTHUR

So it's true. You are no more undone than I.
(to audience)
It was with foreboding that Arthur returned to Camelot.

Scene 7

LIGHT SHIFT. ARTHUR'S castle. ENSEMBLE converges from all directions, surrounding ARTHUR.

ENSEMBLE

Arthur! King! You're back! We were so worried! We thought you were dead. We knew you could do it. Are you all right? It's been so long! Thank heavens. Etc.

ARTHUR

The foul knight's charm is broken. I found the riddle's answer. It was given to me by a...woman I met in the woods.

GUINIVERE

This is a day of joy. Why do you look so sad, husband?

ARTHUR

The cost is more than I can pay.

ENSEMBLE

Ohhh!

SAGRAMOUR

How bad can it be? Who is this woman? What's she like?

ARTHUR

She's the... It's difficult to describe.

(SOUND: **An ominous**, echoing **knock**. An overpowering smell affects the court. DAME **RAGNELL enters wearing a veil**. Still ugly, the demeanor of the Sybil is absent;

SHE'S girlish and cheerful.
ENSEMBLE backs away.)

DAME RAGNELL

Anyone home?

ENSEMBLE

What is that? Get the Lysol. That smell! It's horrible! Etc.

DAME RAGNELL

So, Arthur, here I am as I said. Have you done as you promised?

ARTHUR

Not yet. Perhaps if you stayed a while at court your fine qualities would become apparent.

(SHE lifts the veil.)

DAME RAGNELL

Like this?

SAGRAMOUR

The nerve! Fly-bitten, ill-nurtured--

GAWAIN

Enough! Madame, we have no wish to shame you.

(HE replaces the veil.)

DAME RAGNELL

Ah, Gawain. Always the gentleman. And are you ready to redeem your king's promise?

GAWAIN

If it is in my power, of course.

DAME RAGNELL

There it is, Arthur.

GAWAIN

Gawain, the hag makes a demand--

DAME RAGNELL

For neither riches nor land nor title. But to be given in marriage to a knight of the round table.

GAWAIN

Marriage? To you?

(a sigh)

SAGRAMOUR

Don't be a fool!

GAWAIN

No. A wedding has been promised. A wedding there shall be.
I'll have her.

DAME RAGNELL

And I'll have him.

ARTHUR

We must make...preparations.

GAWAIN

It must be now. We need rings.

DAME RAGNELL

I brought rings.

(SHE puts a ring on, gives one
to GAWAIN.)

Now, Arthur, go ahead before he faints.

(ENSEMBLE reluctantly forms a
wedding party. ENSEMBLE WOMEN
weep.)

ARTHUR

Lady, do you take this knight for your--

DAME RAGNELL

Oh yes, yes I do! My heart's going like mad.

ARTHUR

Gawain, do you take this lady for a wife?

GAWAIN

(a beat)

I do.

ARTHUR

Then I suppose you're married.

Scene 8

SOUND: Mendelson's "Wedding March." A
bed is brought in, blankets and pillows
laid out, perhaps a Lava Lamp appears.
The following dialogue is spoken to the
audience as the ENSEMBLE scurries
about.

SAGRAMOUR

It was what you call a shotgun wedding.

LADY #2

There was no feast.

GUINIVERE

They found them an old room in the castle for their wedding night.

LADY #2

We all left the party as soon as we could.

GUINIVERE

He's lost to us forever!

LADY #2

Oh, Gawain, I would have made you a good wife!

ARTHUR

Gawain, you teach me to be king.

SAGRAMOUR

Ripping, old boy. Best of luck.

DAME RAGNELL

The lady and her husband were left alone to themselves.

(GAWAIN and DAME RAGNELL
remain in the wedding chamber.
ENSEMBLE exits. RAGNELL
bounces on the bed. GAWAIN
stands as far from the bed as
possible.)

DAME RAGNELL

Well, here we are! I do love a bouncy bed. Husband? Oh, there you are. Don't be so stand-offish!

GAWAIN

I never expected I'd marry. At least, not for a while, not in such a rush. I'm not sure what to do.

DAME RAGNELL

There's no hurry. Shall we play a game? To pass the time? You'll find me quite good at haves, I think. Won't you come a little closer?

GAWAIN

If you like.

DAME RAGNELL

Question and answer. But only answer the truth. Promise?

GAWAIN

All right.

DAME RAGNELL

I'll go first. Have you any complaints about your bride? The truth now.

GAWAIN

Pardon, Madam... you are somewhat older than me.

DAME RAGNELL

Old? Why Gawain, I'm surprised at you. With age comes discretion. You don't want some flighty bird do you?
(SHE flaps.)

GAWAIN

But madam... I am a knight of the round table. You are of low degree. Forgive me, I only say this because you asked.

DAME RAGNELL

Low degree? Tush! Poverty's an honest thing. Whoever is contented with her lot, I count her rich. What else?

GAWAIN

You're...

DAME RAGNELL

No beauty?

GAWAIN

Yes.

DAME RAGNELL

Ugly?

GAWAIN

Yes.

DAME RAGNELL

You wanted a pretty wife. But Gawain, that's the slightest thing of all. I know I'm ugly. But with an ugly wife, you'll never be a cuckold. Besides, gentility depends on character, not outward show.

GAWAIN

I like your wit.

DAME RAGNELL

Will you do me one kindness, now? Will you come here and give me a kiss. One kiss, it's all I ask.

GAWAIN

Very well.

(With some hesitation **GAWAIN**
kisses HER.)

Sound: something magical. Perhaps a choir harmonizing off stage. RAGNELL is no longer ugly, but a radiantly beautiful young maid. LIGHT fills the chamber. When RAGNELL speaks, it is in the voice of a young girl.)

GAWAIN

It's not possible!

DAME RAGNELL

Now that was a kiss.

GAWAIN

Who are you?

DAME RAGNELL

Your bride, of course.

GAWAIN

But you're not--

DAME RAGNELL

The old woman? Gawain, that wasn't my true form. It was a spell. And your kiss has broken half of it.

GAWAIN

You're so beautiful. Half? Half?

DAME RAGNELL

Now I can be myself either by day or by night. How would you have me? Beautiful when we are alone together in our chamber, or beautiful for everyone to see when we're at court?

GAWAIN

Must I choose?

DAME RAGNELL

Indeed you must.

GAWAIN

Well, by night then.

DAME RAGNELL

But would you have others still see me as ugly? I don't think I can bear it any more.

GAWAIN

Beautiful by day then.

DAME RAGNELL

And how will I feel when you turn to me in bed and I see revulsion in your eyes?

GAWAIN

This is impossible. You choose. Whatever you will I am content with.

**(SOUND: Something wonderful.
The choir again plus a chime?)**
RAGNELL leaps into GAWAIN'S
arms. ENSEMBLE cheers,
converges around THEM.)

DAME RAGNELL

Husband, you've broken the spell completely!

GUINIVERE

(to audience)

And then she told him how a wicked sorcerer had put a charm on both she and her brother, making her ugly and changing him into the foul knight. But now because Gawain had given her her will, they both were free.

FOUL KNIGHT

(rushing in)

I'm not nasty! I didn't mean a word of it! I take back everything I said!

ARTHUR

Then they had a real wedding,
(SOUND: dance music. ENSEMBLE
dances, plays.)
and a great ball with Reggae music and a punch bowl that never ran dry.

SAGRAMOUR

There was roast pig and balloons and a bubble machine and souvenir matchbooks everyone wore funny hats and it all lasted three days.

DAME RAGNELL

Then Sir Gawain and his new bride retired to their chamber which they didn't come out of for another three days, and lived happily ever after. Would that all sorcery were resolved by such clean magic!

(SHE kisses GAWAIN. With a
flourish the ENSEMBLE blows a
kiss, and:)

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY