

# Structuring Our World Through Stories

## Part III : The Strong Feminine

Anne Thomas

### An Overview

This essay is part of a long, on-going series under the theme of Feminine Consciousness. The first essays dealt with what Feminine Consciousness is and how over the centuries male-dominated cultures have suppressed that energy and way of relating to the world and to oneself. This suppression occurs not only in secular societies, but in religions as well. However, the situation has become so one-sided that we are literally destroying the very earth upon which we live. Therefore, the balancing tendencies of the psyche are bringing forth the complementary forces of the feminine. And this emergence is being felt in almost every domain, one of which is the rewriting of traditional stories away from the theme of the lone brave hero saving a woman in distress to themes with a more balanced view of what it means to be human.

This year's essay deals with the expression of a strong, confident feminine energy and consciousness. It presents this theme through two folk stories, *Lady Ragnall and Tatterhood*.

### A : Redemption of the Feminine Consciousness

#### Lady Ragnall

“What is it that a woman desires most in all the world?”

This question has baffled humankind down through the centuries with each culture presenting its own answer, or attempted answer, in light of its own value system and worldview. Now on the threshold of the 21st century, that question is rising up again, seeking a response appropriate to our times. One reason this inquiry is re-emerging now is that the feminine dimension of the psyche, both within the individual as well as in the collective, is beginning to assert itself; beginning once again to awaken from the deep slumber which the patriarchy has forced it into; and beginning to ask for (and sometimes to demand) attention so that it, too, can mature and develop to become a true, equal and worthy complement to the masculine dimension.

Reciprocally, as the feminine grows consciously into its own development and expression, it is calling upon the masculine to do likewise within its own domain of the psyche. As it matures within its own self, hopefully a way is being prepared for a meeting and true relationship of equals, of self and of other. This developmental process beyond the undifferentiated consciousness (unconsciousness) of matriarchy and the overly developed ego consciousness of patriarchy promises to move us into a entirely new arena of the

psyche and of relationships, opening us up to worlds of which we are just now becoming aware. As we work to consciously birth the feminine dimension of consciousness, we are slowly and literally restructuring our psyches and eventually, it is hoped, restructuring the outer world in which we live.

The story from which the opening question comes is actually quite old. It was written at the time of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In fact, it is a tale about Arthur and one of his noblest knights — his nephew Sir Gawain. Here is how the story goes :

Arthur was out hunting one day and came upon a rather awesome knight. Although Arthur did not recognize him, he (Arthur) had wronged him in the past by taking away some of his land, and since then the knight had sought revenge. Here, at last, was his chance. This knight's name was Gromer Somer Joure (GSJ).

GSJ challenged Arthur to return to the same spot in a year with the answer to the question, "What is it women desire most in all the world?" Arthur agreed to the challenge, and turned to his noblest, most handsome nephew, Sir Gawain, for assistance. They both rode all over the kingdom, asking the opinions of both men and women, seeking a consensus.

When only one month remained, Arthur chanced upon an incredibly ugly hag. Her name was Lady Ragnall. She boldly went up to Arthur and told him none of the answers he had was the right one. She also told him she knew the correct answer, but he had to promise her one thing for it. Arthur asked her what that was, and she said to wed Sir Gawain. Despite being the king, Arthur was humble enough to say that it was up to Gawain to decide that for himself.

Arthur was very upset by this state of affairs and rode off to tell Gawain the situation. Gawain, being a very devoted, loyal follower of Arthur, agreed to the condition. So Arthur returned to Lady Ragnall to get the answer.

When the day came, Arthur went off to meet GSJ. He tried several of the other answers he had gotten in his year's quest, but none of them suited GSJ. Finally, he told him the answer given him by Lady Ragnall. "What a woman most wants is to have her way." Of course, this was the correct response. GSJ was furious and stormed off saying, "My sister told you!" He had forever lost his chance to take revenge on Arthur.

Even though Arthur did not lose the challenge or his life, he was crestfallen at the fate that awaited Sir Gawain. But Gawain mustered all his courage and agreed to go through with his promise to marry Lady Ragnall. She was ecstatic and

demanded an elaborate wedding with a parade through the streets, a high mass and a banquet. At the wedding she behaved in a very uncouth manner, laughing and shouting, ripping apart meat with her hands and stuffing it into her mouth. She was completely foul, and everyone cringed in sorrow for what had befallen Gawain.

After the feasting, Lady Ragnall and Gawain went to the wedding chamber, but Gawain could not bring himself to look at his bride. She told him had had to at least kiss her. Gawain again plucked up all his courage and told her he would do what his duty as a husband called upon him to do. Then he kissed her on the cheek, but quickly turned away.

When he turned to look at his wife once again, there before him stood a fair and gracious lady, the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Gawain was awestruck and took her in his arms. "My beauty will not hold," she said. "Only half the evil spell has lifted from me. Now you must choose, Gawain, when you would like me beautiful, during the day or during the night."

Gawain thought and thought and finally said, "This is going to affect you more than it is me. So I will let *you* choose when you wish to be beautiful and when to be ugly." With that, Lady Ragnall beamed with radiant joy. The spell her stepmother had put on her was fully lifted, and she chose to be beautiful always, because she had been given the chance to have her own way. (Zimmer 1993, 88-95)

To give an even more vivid picture of Lady Ragnall before her conversion back to her original nature, here is how she was described by Angeles Arrien :

And there standing before him was the ugliest woman he had even seen in his entire life... She had gritty, greasy hair and flies hovercrafting around. And she had big red boils on her cheeks and a wart on her nose. She had hair that curled underneath her chin. And she had craggy yellow teeth. When the wind blew she smelled foul... [At the marriage feast] she took off the turkey legs and she chewed them and oil got all over her face and her fingers. And little flicks of turkey went up on her face. Everyone could hardly wait until it was over (Arrien 1991, cassette tape).

As with any story, there are many levels of interpretation. For us, we will now look at it from the angle of redeeming the feminine principle so that a true relationship between the masculine and feminine can occur.

Why is Lady Ragnall under the spell of ugliness? We are told her stepmother threw it

upon her, so it probably comes from jealousy or from her mother teaching her daughter — as she had been taught before her — to live her life according to a man's desire rather than living as her own authentic self. Living so dishonestly towards one's soul always renders one ugly, especially to oneself. However, seen from a larger perspective, Lady Ragnall could be carrying projects of the negative aspect of the feminine, the inner feminine that is rejected or hated. From a masculine perspective, she could be the demonic devouring mother or the harping, unsatisfied mate. She could be the belittling tendency of a negative anima. Yet, she could also be an undeveloped, unincorporated animus within a woman who tends to be boorish, demanding, loud and opinionated.

Lady Ragnall, a powerful woman in her own right, boldly confronted Arthur and set the condition for her marriage to Gawain. At the wedding, she demanded the pomp and circumstance of a royal marriage. She shamelessly took charge in the wedding chamber telling Gawain he had to at least kiss her. Is not such assertiveness unattractive to many men — and often to women, too?

Gawain behaved towards ugly Ragnall according to duty. He remained loyal to Arthur, a symbol of objective consciousness and the masculine principle. He maintained that stance of duty in his agreeing to consummate the marriage. So, even though Gawain approached Ragnall only out of duty to and love of Arthur, the mere fact of his recognizing her and treating her fairly enabled her spell to be partially lifted. By being recognized and honored, the feminine, even if she is at her most ugly, has the chance to step aside from the negative projections upon her and be seen as lovely. Once recognized and accepted, she no longer has to be a shrew to gain attention. Her true nature, always radiant and beautiful, can reveal itself.

However, since Gawain was acting out of duty to a collective (Arthur and the institute of marriage) rather than out of love for her (true love for his own inner feminine aspect — the anima — or for the feminine principle in us all), her beauty was only half redeemed.

The feminine principle followed her own advice, her own values by giving Gawain the choice of when he would like her beautiful — day or night. By giving him the choice, she was letting him know that she was not in the relationship to control him, as the devouring mother principle would. Given his freedom, Gawain, in his deep maturity, realized the horrible curse that Lady Ragnall was forced to endure. He attuned to the pain and shame she had to experience because of her ugliness. Probably, for the first time, he became aware of the power the curse of male values had upon not only actual women, but upon the feminine principle within the psyche also. Getting in touch with the inner dimension of the feminine — its feeling side — Gawain, at long last, could respect it enough to recognize it as a valid other, not as an object to be controlled or manipulated, and not as inferior.

From this new, deeper, more mature stance, Gawain could return to Lady Ragnall what she had given him — the freedom to choose her own fate. That, of course, broke the curse, the negative projection that had been placed upon her. Finally, she was seen to have and could experience within herself the respect, trust, honor and dignity that she had always

deserved. She did not have to resist the evil inflicted upon her by becoming ugly. She also did not have to seek revenge for what had been thrust upon her. Rather, in the end, she could put all that aside and manifest her true inner nature. Matter had become spiritualized, the soul reconnected to its divine source.

Interestingly, even when Lady Ragnall was at her ugliest, she knew and revealed what was needed for her redemption. “What a woman desires most in all the world is to have her own way.” Fortunately, Arthur listened and followed her advice, although he first tried every possible alternative. And Gawain, too, acted upon the truth she had revealed by attuning to her position and giving her the choice for her own life. The key to redemption lies within what is most condemned. It is up to us to experience *both* the ugliness and the beauty *in one place*. We must have depth enough and be mature enough to contain those extreme opposites, not as separate, but as parts of a larger whole. When we can see the dialect between extremes despite conflicting appearances, then we can transcend them and become whole within ourselves. This is the promise held out to us in this 15<sup>th</sup> century story of Lady Ragnall, the most ugly and the most beautiful all in one.

## B : Assertiveness

### Tatterhood

Almost everyone wants to make choices for his/her own life. Unfortunately, very often the society we live in or the consciousness we carry around with us create an arena of dominator/dominated. As we have seen, however, in *Sir Gawain and Lady Ragnall*, a true relationship between respected equals can occur. It requires maturity on the part of both partners, or both aspects of the psyche, but it can be done.

A modern story called *Tatterhood* does not begin in such a regressive state as *Sir Gawain and Lady Ragnall* because most people accept Tatterhood for who she is from the start, although she is a bit odd and raucous.

Tatterhood is a princess who has a twin sister. Although they are polar opposites, they dearly love each other. Tatterhood’s sister was pretty normal, but Tatterhood was a tomboy. She wore torn, muddy clothes, rode a goat and carried a wooden spoon. She was active, noisy and fully in charge of her life. The people surrounding her accepted her for who she was, possibly because they knew they could never change her.

One day, some troll came to visit the castle. Everyone ran away and hid except Tatterhood, who took things under her charge. Her poor sister did not follow Tatterhood’s instructions to stay hidden, and had her head replaced by a calf’s head in the process.

In order to redeem her sister, Tatterhood sets off on a long journey to find the trolls. Her sister begged to go with her, so off they went. When they reached the land of the trolls, the sister stayed on the boat, but Tatterhood set off alone to see about getting back her sister's head. She succeeded, of course.

Instead of returning home, they decided to continue their voyage and see some of the world. They anchored on the shore of another kingdom and the king invited them to come ashore and meet the princes. Tatterhood refused, saying that the princes could come to them if they wanted to meet the girls.

The elder prince came and, of course, he fell in love with the pretty sister and wanted to marry her. She refused, saying she would marry only if Tatterhood did too. Later, there was a feast at the castle and the girls were invited. The elder prince persuaded his younger brother to escort Tatterhood, which he did reluctantly. The sister dressed in a lovely gown, but Tatterhood said, "I will go as I am."

They went by procession to the palace. Tatterhood and the younger prince rode side by side. At first the young escort was irritated and said nothing. This annoyed Tatterhood, who told him he was boring. Then the prince asked her why she was on a goat and not a horse.

"If I choose, I can ride on a horse," and sure enough, the goat changed into a strong, sleek steed.

This really perked up the prince's interest, so he asked about the ragged hood she had over her head.

"I can change it if I choose," and immediately, long, thick, dark hair full of gold and pearls appeared.

And the wooden spoon? It became a gold-tipped wand. (Phelps 1978, 1-6)

This tale is obviously about young people. Many of the stories about women written today are about adolescents. This is probably because the feminine within us has not yet been given the opportunity to mature. She is either just being discovered or just beginning to be allowed out of her cage. She is just now being recognized as a valuable aspect of ourselves and of our world. She — and we — have a lot of growing up to do before the girls in our stories will become full-grown, mature human beings.<sup>1</sup>

At first, Tatterhood is quite headstrong and bossy. She does exactly as she pleases and

tells everyone what to do. She is also fearless and likes to be fully in charge. Her goat connects her to primitive instincts, so she is in touch with a very natural, earthy, undeveloped part of her nature. Her wooden spoon is used as a sword or a paddle. She has not yet developed the nurturing aspect of her feminine nature to use a spoon for stirring or eating food. Rather, she is using it to control others. Her inner masculine, her animus, seems to have the upper hand here. She obviously has not learned how to relate to him as a guide.

Part of this negative, animus-dominated girl, however, is gentle and more traditionally feminine. In this story that part is symbolized by her twin sister. Since they are twins, the connection between them is strong, meaning those aspects of Tatterhood have not been fully differentiated. This can also be seen when the sister refuses to marry (leave her childhood identity attachment for a mature relationship) unless Tatterhood does.

Their journey by sea could be seen as a reliance upon the unconscious to take them to places most needed for their development. They set out by choice (a masculine trait) and for a fight (also masculine), but when they come to a new, unknown kingdom, they refuse to get out of the security of their own little world, their boat. The more objective ego consciousness (the elder prince) has to go to them. However, unlike traditional tales where the woman is a passive victim, waiting for the man to save her, here she is active and knows exactly when she wants. She is both immature and yet strong in her sense of integrity to herself. She already knows who she is in her own right.

The younger prince is not yet as developed as his brother, but he soon opens up to growth when he asks Tatterhood questions. Her answers let him know that his route to ego development will not take him to controlling a passive woman. His masculine cannot depend on that. The journey young people face today is a new one; one in which both boys and girls have to develop within themselves and also to respect in both themselves and others.

The story continues with the younger prince asking Tatterhood about her clothing, which she chooses to turn into a soft green velvet outfit. The prince knows Tatterhood well by now and his only comment is : “The color becomes you very well.”

Then there is a switch. It is as if Tatterhood *wants* to change, so she begins asking the prince if he will ask about her dirty face, but his reply is only : “That, too, shall be as you choose.”

This young prince is already wise to “what a woman desires most in all the world.” Tatterhood still has a long way to go before she learns it applies to other people besides herself, but maybe that is quite normal. When a repress/suppressed part of the psyche is

---

1 . A hopeful indication that these young folks are growing up (and our psyches with them) can be seen by the immense popularity of the film *Titanic*. Granted, for many people, it was the greatest love story of the decade, but seen differently, it is also an account of a woman who was similar to Tatterhood. She would not compromise her inner integrity to follow the expectations of her social milieu. She was determined to live her own life and to do what she, herself, chose. She held onto her ideals. When her first love died, she continued a life shaped by her own choices. She was not crushed by his death. She never forgot him, but she used him as a guide and a motivator for her. In other words, he became her mature, well-developed animus.

finally recognized and given permission to express itself, it naturally comes forth in rather rough, self-centered ways. We can see this in Feminism before it began to develop into Feminine Consciousness.

The end of the story shows a development where a new culture places its values, not on beauty or on marriage, but on the fullness and joy of the present moment — of being who we are, and of accepting others as they are, not as we might want them to be.

As they rode through the castle gates, Tatterhood touched the rowan wand to her face, and the soot streaks disappeared. And whether her face now was lovely or plain we shall never know, because it didn't matter in the least to the prince's brother or to Tatterhood. But this you can tell: the feast at the castle was a merry one, with the games and the singing, and the dancing lasting for many days (Phelps, op. cit., 6).

### References

- Kawai, Hayao. 1996. *The Japanese Psyche*. Woodstock, CT:Spring Publications.  
Phelps, Ethel Johnson. 1978. *Tatterhood*. New York: The Feminist Press  
Thomas, Anne G.B. 2000. *Structuring our World Through Stories. Part II*. Sendai, Japan : Shokei Women's College Professors' Publications.  
Yoshimoto, Banana. 1998. *Kitchen*. Trans. Megun Backus. Tokyo: Grove Press through Japan Foreign-Rights Center.  
Zimmer, Heinrich. 1993. *The King and the Corpse*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

#### Cassette Tapes :

Arrien, Angeles. 1991. *Power and Love in Relationships*. Boulder : Sounds True Recordings.

#### Videos :

*Titanic*. 1998. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures.