

Sir Gromer's Deadly Wager by Nell Smyth

Open in darkness. Entire cast appears to a distant drum beat, faces illuminated by candles, reciting "The Gododdin"

Quiet descends as Morgaine and Merlin appear

From the mists of Avalon, from faery woods in silver light,
Out of the castles of border lands, fringed by oaks and rivers deep
From Caerleon to Camelot,
Worlds of mystery, woven in time
Summoned in song

The Druid call from the old oak trees,
A dream of ancient peace,
Borne on winds, whispered in stones,
The guiding pulse of Arthur's reign,
Quickens the hearts of those who hear.
And know, what matters.

Where is the questing?
There lies meaning

But who will tell the tale when we are gone?

Descending from the aerial heights above a figure is seen climbing down

Taliesin:

I am Taliesin,
I sing perfect metre which will last to the end of the world
I am Taliesin, poet of the king,
Bard of the tales
Life giver of the story
Weaver in time and
Summoner of the ancient magyk

I know why there is an echo in the hollow,
Why silver gleams; why breath is black;
Why a cow has horns, why a woman is affectionate;
Why milk is white; why holly is green,
Why brine is salt, why ale is bitter; Why the linnet is green and berries red, Why a cuckoo complains, why it sings; I know where the cuckoos of summer are in winter. I know what beasts there are at the bottom of the sea. How many spears in the battle, how many drops in a shower, Why a river drowned Pharaoh's people, why fishes have scales. Why a white swan has black feet.....

I have been a blue salmon, I have been a dog, a stag, a roebuck on the mountain, A stock, a spade, an axe in the hand, A stallion, a bull, a buck, I was reaped and placed in an oven; I fell to the ground when I was being roasted and a hen swallowed me. For nine nights I was in her crop. I have been dead, I have been alive. I am Taliesin..... bard to the king.

I am the salmon leaping in the fresh babbling brook,
I am the sword hurling into the hand of my brave knight
I am the willow weeping into waters that run by
I am the hawk soaring with his hunting eye
I am the fire leaping in the king's own hearth
I am the laughter in the mouth of the queen
I am the moss that grows on rocks by the stream
I am the dragon lurking in the earth's own belly
I am love kindling in the glance of a sweet maiden

Scene 2 - The palace stables**Groom:**

Muck 'n straw, mucking straw, mucking straw till my back shall break. I am the lowliest groom that ever Queen Mab o' the faery folk cursed and witched. O tis all very well as my mother would say.. Thou art lucky my son, thou art blessed my son, thou art to serve at the court of the King of Camelot where all those brave knights and all those fine ladies do sit. Well there's no round table in the stable, and there's no fair mare for me to ride. The smell of horse sweat and dung is far closer to my nose than the smell of roasted capon or sweet mead. And the kitchen maid hath refused me yet.....is there a devil doth sit on my shoulder?.....

Nearby the oak tree by the palace stables a group of young knights arrive, full of high spirits.

Gareth:

Aye, stern and steadfast the battle hounds fought! Huge, dark socketed, crimson spears they thrust and threw! Shields split, split to bits! Groom ! Get thee gone! To work! Our horses sweat and wait not on thy sloth!
(**Groom exits giving a dirty look towards the knights**)

Tell us Owaine of thy quest outside the forest of Broceliande and what thou didst't find there as thou went deeper and deeper into it!

Owaine:

Hast heard of the great hedge of mist? Tis higher than seventy men and deeper than the Druid's forest. Clammy coldness that bites to the bone, a high hedge that one can't not go through it , nor under nor over it. Tis the very devil of the heart of a misty mystery I say!

Peredur:

My mother would tell me that climbing walls and hedges would ever lead me astray.

Gareth:

Aye Peredur an' she had good reason! For the last of seven sons and no husband at home she might want to keep thee at home all thy life!

Gawain:

Aye but dressed all as a meek maiden! S'truth Peredur, I am most glad that thou hast found other ways to protection than dressed all as a gentle lady.

Peredur:

I for one am sorry that we have lost ourselves in the hedge of mist and that another story could be told than mine. But say, who hath seen the good Sir Cuthbert these past nine days?

Gawaine:

Good Peredur! I meant not to offend! As for Cuthbert, he hath been questing in the northern lands and is not yet returned to court.

Gareth:

Aye, for our cousin Cuthbert doth ever do the job thoroughly! Not for him the one day quest!

Owaine:

Brothers, look yonder! All this talk of maidenhood hath summoned our courtly maidens hither!

Gawaine:

I could happily take time with such maidenhead as this. Such a gaggle of fine girls as might move any man to bliss! Owaine! Brother, thou art not done with thy questing tale but let us see another right here! Go press my suit on that tall, fair maiden whose demeanour doth much move me!

Gareth:

The lady Myfanwy brother? She is new at Arthur's court and hath not yet a knight of her own favor so I hear! Rumor hath it she is wild at heart and would prefer to be her own knight than have one of us to serve her!

Gawaine:

In short, a lady of some mettle who would fight her own battles!

Peredur:

Do not play too teasingly with the ladies my Lord Gawaine! Such tender hearts and delicate minds. Remember, thy reputation!

Gawain:

Why just so! My reputation! Am I not a ladies' man?

Owaine:

Be that singular or plural brother?

Gareth:

Go Owaine, I beseech thee. Approach this bevy of laughing girls! Spare us the ailing wit of a roving eye.

Peredur:

For to rove without clear aim is eventually to miss thy grail.

Gawain:

Ah brother Percy! Wise and sagacious beyond thine years! Go Owaine meet thy quest! I am sick of bad wit and unrequited love.

Owaine walks towards the group of ladies who have been dallying and laughing occasionally looking towards the knights

Owaine:

Good morrow fair ladies! How goes it?

All the ladies curtsey

Bronwen:

Why Lord Owaine thou seems wondrously clear-headed after thy dalliance in the hedge of mist! We heard it was marvelous strange!

Owaine:

T'was most wet and clammy my lady and at the last, insurmountable!

Angharad:

Well Owaine we have missed thee. Thou wilt find our ears most ready for thy tales of questing. We yearn for magic and enchantment in these droll castle days.

Myfanwy:

My Lord, we still repeat the tale of thy last quest. The Castle Hideous, the Monstrous Hag and the Ghastly Hunched back Giant who plagued the northern lands. We know thy last quest backwards and forwards!

Bronwen:

That thou art unbudged in battle! Thy blue blade ever glittering in the dappled sunlight!

Angharad:

Not stained, stainless! Not faulty but faultless!

Bronwen:

A raging hero in combat!

Myfanwy:

Like a wild boar! In the midst of strife a slayer!

Angharad:

Leaving shields shattered in splinters! Rent in twain!

Bronwen:

Unbudging anchor in combat! Ungrudging hero on the field! Tell us Owaine of thy last great quest!

Owaine:

My ladies! Like the incoming tide thou breaks on this shore so genial and generous!

Guinevere:

Why my Lord Owaine, how is it that the other knights do not approach us?

Owaine bows and is clearly surprised to see the queen

Owaine:

Why, your majesty, Queen Guinivere, I saw you not! I have been pressed to make approach to the fair Lady Myfanwy.

Owaine bows while the others giggle flirtatiously. Myfanwy draws herself up to her full height.

Gawaine watching from a distance

Gawaine:

Why the lady Myfanwy is an amazon queen! Lissom, lovely and light bedazzling! Mine heart doth ache to behold such beauty.

Peredur:

He hath already gone a questing (**pats Gawaine on the shoulder**)

Owaine:

My lady Myfanwy, My lord Gawaine seeks to know thee better

Myfanwy:

To know me better? 'Twere better my lord might better himself the first!

Owaine:

He might feel better were thou to show him some favor!

Myfanwy:

To tell thee the truth which I am wont to do, I have lost my favor somewhere in these parts.

Owaine:

And are these parts that might but favor a lord!

Myfanwy:

For sure my Lord, thou hast been engaged to bring a suit to me that is not thine but thy brother's. Forgive me but in my father's castle at Llanllandrech in Wales, we were ever free spoken. I find thy mode both quaint and indirect. Does not Owaine himself seek to know me better?

Angharad:

Thou art a wild stallion, Myfanwy!

Guinivere

Watch out Lord Owaine for the strong and rustic tongue of my Lady Myfanwy. She hath the wild ways of the Welsh borderlands and eschews our courtly modes of politeness as foolish and vain. Yet she sings with a voice that doth charm us all; she hath been endowed with the voice of a true

songbird!

Myfanwy:

My lord speaks most forwardly for thy brother Gawaine. How speakest thou for thyself?

Owaine:

I am backwards in being forwards? Mayhap, I am still in that hedge of mist; not so clear headed after all. My Lady Myfanwy, thou art most teasing.

Myfanwy:

Owaine I would find thee clear hearted much as thou art in the mist. To find me teasing, tis not pleasing?

Owaine:

My lady uses her tongue wisely? Such a tongue might cut to the helpless heart when used steely sharp or cruelly quick.

Myfanwy:

Better my Lord, in the hunt, to be sharp and quick, than soft and blunt!

Owaine:

Touche my lady, I'll withdraw and pray for thy compassion! See thee at court. My ladies!

Guinivere:

Owaine, please bid your brothers good day!

Owaine:

Your Majesty!

Owaine bows and returns to his cohort of brother knights

Gawaine:

Why so perplexed brother? We saw much mirth and laughter!

Everyone is distracted by the sounds of screaming and wailing coming closer. Followed by silence and the sight of a young maiden riding a horse and with the body of a dead knight

The ladies move away shocked while the knights group closer and everyone watches in silence as the lady gets closer and closer.

Peredur:

God and all his angels give us mercy! It is Sir Cuthbert, our brave fellow knight.

Lady in Distress:

The North's true valor one knight possesses,

Kind-hearted, magnanimous,

None walk the earth, No mother has borne

One so fair, so strong,

As dark as iron,

From a war lord his bright blade saved me

From a place of death,

From a harsh land he bore me

To this golden place called Camelot!

Yet on the road his wounds did offer the road a red and stony trail.

He is dead!

Peredur:

How died he, sweet lady?

Lady:

In valiant combat. He would not cease. I begged him but he forswore, saying it was noblesse oblige to fight unto the death.

Gareth:

Aye, the code of chivalry forbids him surrender!

Lady:

But even when his lady, to whom he hath sworn sovereignty, begs him so!

(weeps)

O harsh world that courts its knights to coldest death!

Bronwen:

Sure he died glorious in the battle! A hero, fighting for another's cause!

Angharad:

Tis a most Christian act to lay down thy life for another.

Gawain:

But now a Christian burial, must await our dear comrade. Brothers let us take him forth!

Gawaine and the other knights come forward to help the maiden and take up the body of the knight

Owaine:

He died in valor and now the cold earth his bed.

Peredur:

Let all here mourn our brave knight; a requiem mass for his valiant soul

Bronwen:

And the sweet memory of a life that was short and good.

LIGHTS DIM

Scene 3 – Nearby the palace stables

Great bugling and trumpeting is heard off stage and we are in the same place outside the castle.

Messenger:

The king calls us to the hunt! Put on your hunting green! Swift thick maned stallions, hunting horses and marvelous mares! To saddle! To saddle! The buck starts in the bush! The hart springs its byre and the boar goes rooting through the forests of Camelot! Let us go forth!
The King decrees the first hunt of Maytime! Do not dally! Do not delay, else we'll be tardy and displease the king!

Much scurrying and joyful running around as all the lords and ladies go to their horses.

Arthur appears as a line forms either side of him facing the audience, horses bridling and ready to go.

Arthur:

Lords and ladies our kingdom doth enjoy much peace and harmony and all at home in Camelot is well! Therefore, let us seek the hunt and have much sport this fine spring day!
My lovely, Queen Guinevere wilt make fair sport with us and bring the ladies by the gentler path?

Guinevere:

Your majesty we would ever follow our lords! However, might we not judge the path as well as our noble knights?

Arthur (laughing):

Question thy husband's care for thy safety? My fair queen if thou judge the path safe then I will bow to thy fair sovereignty!

Guinevere:

My good Lord, thy noblesse oblige is the mark of thy great and fair kingship! I trust that we may not challenge nor bring to trial such great trust! Ladies of the court ride we with spirit but with care! N'est ce pas?

Myfanwy:

Your Majesty we'll tread the straight and narrow in the flurry of the hunt! But let us find our way on the instant!

Bugle sounds again as the king leads his knights and servants off towards the hunt moving with much baying of hounds and hallooing of servants beating the ground and whooping of knights, all around the audience. The queen watches the hullabaloo and then follows at fast pace with her ladies. Sounds gradually fade as do the lights to a very distant sound of yelping.

Scene 4 - The forest

A light illumines a small part of the forest. Sounds of approaching huntsmen are heard from the distance. Voices off stage become clearer and more distinct but still no one has yet come into view.

Peredur:

Your majesty I saw the white hart! 'Twas this way it went for sure!

Gawaine:

The company goes the other way round in their pursuit. Take we this way and we shall surely secure our prize!

Arthur:

Come good Gawaine let us take this path! Peredur my noble knight stand here to ensure that no ladies are endangered coming too close should they hap this way!

Arthur and Gawaine ride into the light on horseback. Arthur dismounts and hands his horse to Gawaine.

Arthur:

I see the flank of white concealed in the bush. This white hart here shall be claimed and signify the great might and valour of our court! Unwavering courage, loyal heart and noble surrender mark the men of our time who in the hunt and in the quest do serve our kingdom, Camelot!

Arthur plunges the sword into the hart behind the bush on the word Camelot. Darkness follows a great rending sound and a gigantic figure looms up with a sword to Arthur's neck. Gawaine starts forward and Peredur runs into the space as the knight holds his other hand to halt them.

Sir Gromer Somer Joure:

Well met King Arthur! Thou hast done me wrong many a year! I shall take thy life here in the forest! For thy sword hath brought me death and sorrow and robbed me of my lands. I hold thy life days nigh done!

Arthur:

Thou armed and I but clothed all in green! Dishonorable death! Sire, what is thy name that thou holdest such great grievance 'gainst the king?

Sir Gromer Somer Joure:

I am Sir Gromer Somer Joure!

Arthur:

I know thee not!

Peredur:

Sire! We beg thee for mercy! Take this knight, Peredur, who serves the king in atonement for the wrong thou feels. We are the sharp swords that questing go and do the deeds that hath brought thee such great sorrow.

Sir Gromer Joure:

Too late for mercy! I seek revenge!

Arthur:

The wrong that I have done thee, I know not and yet it grieves me that I harmed thee so to bring thine ire to such a murderous heat.

Gawaine:

Sir Gromer Joure, this is the king that brings us from dark and turbulent savagery into an age of chivalry and peace. Take his life and thou unleash the darkest forces that move instinctual in the bones of the earth; the wailing of motherless babes, the mourning of widows, the gnashing of teeth, bloodshed, untold cruelty, will ring like a dirge about thy head! Dreadful slaughter come like a famine to shrivel our crops, making the land a feast for carrion crows while laughter and song die in the throat, every heart hardening in sorrow.

Sir Gromer Joure:

I can offer little mercy but only a riddle impossible to answer!

Peredur:

Gods' teeth! Say it man and let it be determined!

Sir Gromer Joure: (laughing horribly)

Swear to come to this very spot a year hence at Maytime, dressed all in hunting green, unarmed, and bring as quittance, if thou can'st, the answer to this riddle.

Gawaine:

Enough of threats man! What is the question that we may search it out!

Sir Gromer Joure: (laughing horribly)

The question sires is this: What is it that a woman most desires in all the world? I'll see thee hence!

He disappears rapidly, laughing all the while. Arthur released from being pinned, rubs his throat and shakes his head. Gawaine and

Peredur gather the horses. The three of them start to trot back through the forest around the audience in reflective mood.

Peredur:

Is this a simple question with a simple answer? I fancy not!

Arthur:

Can there be one answer for all women? How is it possible? Does not one woman change her mind a thousand times a day?

Gawaine:

I know not and yet I know this reedy river that we ride beside doth flow and eddy in its changes each moment as we ride beside it ; moving from shallows to depths and in those depths there lives the character of which we call the river by its name. In that very naming there lives through time a constancy and character whereof we know this is the River .

Peredur:

O deep, deep indeed!

Arthur: (sighing)

I'll leave philosophy to thee and Merlin and deep rivers to the boatmen. Meantime we must ask every lady in the land, every girl and crone the question. What can it be that woman most desires?

Gawaine:

My king, let us saddle our horses afresh and make them ready to ride into strange lands

Wherever we meet either man or woman we'll ask of them the riddle.

Peredur:

We'll make a book of every kind of response and see what ringeth true and best? Talking to the ladies Gawaine. Tis a quest that suits thee well!

They spur their horses and whinnying and laughing gallop off. Lights go down. Courtly music plays

Scene 5 Outside the palace stables

Groom:

I am not spurned. For my little Meg tells me that if she can but name the day and time and name the place..... why she'll be mine! I cannot work it out! I have offered her the sweetest kisses, the warmest embrace and to roll in the hay? I even offered her to ride the Queen Guinivere's own gray mare and still she refused..... Oops I see a fine lady seeking her white horse, rings on her fingers this one, and bells on her toes and, whoops, the Lord Gawaine with her wherever she goes.....

Gawaine and the lady Angharad approach, lingering by the large oak tree

Gawaine:

My lady Angharad, canst tell me what woman most desires in all the world?

Angharad:

Why Sir Gawaine! What is it to you?

Gawaine:

All the world my lady!

Angharad:

My lord! My answer is all the world to thee!

Gawaine (awkwardly):

Tis a riddle I must solve!

Angharad:

Am I thy riddle Sir Gawaine! Seekest to unlock my mind and know what I desire?

Gawaine:

Yes! No! I seek, I seek to know in general..... ..it is a mystery to a man and we would ever know the deeper secrets of the fairer sex!

Angharad:

Why Sir Gawaine! Thou art grown marvelous deep in thy questing! Yet it seems to me a maid must know her own mind before she would dare to say out loud what is that thing she most doth want!

*Angharad leaves laughing flirtatiously as if she has won the game.
Gawaine sighs and folds his arms.*

Gawaine:

Most teasing this questioning of these ladies at court. They think I come to press suit and laughing play and then at the end of it I have no answer!

Peredur:

Gawaine! How goes it? I have the book of answers.

Gawaine:

Most badly Peredur! I am not a good knight for questing in court! The sides are too slippery and I am ever falling into the water with no answer for all my pains!

Peredur:

A pain for thee to talk with the ladies of court! But, I do hear thee, for in our secret quest they do not know that tis a matter of life or death. That in uncovering this riddle our king may live or die. But I have four score and twenty answers here!

Gawaine:

I am amazed! I'll hear them all!

Arthur (entering) :

Brothers well met! How has thy questing fared?

Gawaine :

Peredur hath a book, of some great price, I'll wager full. Feminine statements of desire from ladies and maids throughout the court!

Arthur:

Let's hear thy work good Peredur! If the book do not burn thy fingers quite!

Peredur:

Some women say they most desire my lord.....

Arthur:

What sayest thou! That cannot be the answer!

Peredur:

No, no my **LORD**, I was not yet begun..... some women say they most desire to be well arrayed

Arthur (distracted):

Silks, velvets, fine lace from France, linen from Ireland and all the finery of peacock loveliness? Apparel? Arrayment is what these ladies most desire?

Peredur:

So it seems, my lord.

Arthur:

Mmmnn!

Peredur:

Other women with whom we have spoke say their deepest desire is to be praised

Arthur:

Praised and spoken well of, flattered and showered?

Peredur:

Aye my king!

Gawaine (reading over his shoulder):

Some others say they love to be embraced by a man who is lusty and strong

Peredur:

To be clasped in his arms and kissed all night long.

Arthur:

Answers more to my liking

Peredur:

Your majesty the book is thick, mayhap we have sufficient answers here!

Arthur:

Something makes me doubt. To find the very thing that Sir Gromer Somer Joure

intended, eludes us still.

Gawaine:

My king, let I and my brothers ride forth further than court and seek answers more wild and strange than these our courtly ladies bring. For in the forests and lands beyond, is wisdom, untrained ways that may give us the wellspring to the truth that we do seek.

Arthur:

Gawaine, I bless thee in thy seeking. I find I am despondent with it all, thoughts throng and cares cluster. This life at court is after all but the surface of a deeper world from which we are sometimes too much distracted. Would that Merlin might be here to give us counsel.

Gawaine:

Let us to the forests and the lands beyond! Call we Owaine and Gareth! Let us saddle up and go forth! Your Majesty, your blessing!

Gawaine and Peredur leave after Arthur has anointed them

Arthur:

As for me I will revisit the faery places of the forest where mossy roots offer a place of quiet calm. Mayhap the old Druid wisdom that whispers in the trees and the sweet robin songs of spring can solace my aching heart and troubled brow.

Scene 6 – A room in the palace.

Bronwen:

Why Sir Gareth! Thou art all alone!

Gareth:

I was, my lady, playing a game of chess. Dost thou play?

Bronwen:

Indeed I do!

Gareth:

Then might we have a game on my return from this next quest?

Bronwen:

O thou art leaving for a quest!

Gareth:

Aye, for the Perilous Forest.

Bronwen:

Ah the forest! Wilt take an amulet from a lady who wishes thee well?

Gareth:

An amulet from thee my lady?

Bronwen:

Tis an ancient Druid charm to bring protection 'gainst terrors of the forest. I have studied the ancient arts in my father's house and made a magic charm that can serve to protect thee if thou remember when thou art in danger.

Gareth:

Well thank thee dear Lady Bronwen thy charms indeed may well be full of the old magic.

I take my leave.

Bronwen:

Mayhap we'll play that game of chess when thou art returned good lord!
Farewell!

Gareth leaves.

Bronwen:

I see these brave knights all questing go, alone or with a fellow knight; adventuring into unknown mysteries. Is it my destiny to always stay at home? My father did not send me to the nunnery but seeing fit to send me to Camelot told me that I might here find a golden time. And yet, I find the ways of court all full of gossip and game. Can I not ride a horse? Can I not wield a sword, nor shoot an arrow? Am I not full of sport and game? As good as any one of my

brothers in the field? Yet, born a woman, I am confined in courtly ways to embroider cloths and parry with words, to jest and never, not once, to go a questing. To slay a dragon of my very own? And why not? Because I am a woman!

O Morgaine, mother priestess! Weave your magic glamour, enfold me in the mystery of the old earth wisdom! Take me into the arms of the forest to know the ancient ways. My ears are muffled by the sounds of court, deafened to the simple sounds of truth. Remind me of this thinly veiled world! Beyond these walls of stone, there pulses life! A deep and soundless flow that murmurs a remembering of whence we came.MorgaineMorgaine? Art here?

Scene 7 *The edge of a dark forest*

Owaine:

Nay! Nay, in truth, I find the lady Myfanwy quite fair and yet she says she does not need a knight to serve her! I am not a little intimidated (**sighs**) Is this not the Perilous Forest spoken of before good Gareth?

Gareth:

Aye this is it! For myself, I find the Lady Bronwen most compelling. Her brothers tell me that she can shoot and joust as well as any man! Hold fast to thy horse for this is a place most full of surprises!

Owaine:

Say true! Yet tis not likely we'll ever see such skill on the jousting field at Camelot! Unless my Lady Bronwen disguises herself in knightly form! And that would be a shame for she is quite lovely as she is! (**laughter**) Sure, Gareth it is not likely that we will meet with those who might answer our riddle in this dark, dank place.

Gareth:

Aye but wondrous hallucinations come by the light of the moon. As darkness falls a strange shimmering glow casts a pall throughout the place and he who can hold fast through the terrors and beauties of the place may find a path that leads to Merlin's cave.

Owaine:

And if we can but find Merlin we may find the answer to our riddle!

Gareth:

If the life of his king is at stake, surely Merlin would be ready to help.... If he can but be found....

Lights start to get dimmer and ambiance of the forest changes. Whisperings are heard and the knights ride more nervously and alert to every movement than before.

Gareth:

Merlin sorcerer, shape shifter, mover in time, art thou close..... ?

Mutterings grow larger and louder. Suddenly from behind them giant hags appear and jump on the shoulder of the knights riding them hard and laughing horribly

Owaine:

Arrgh! I am attacked. In heaven's name what foul-smelling hag-ridden monster doth ride my back!

Gareth:

Hold fast Owaine! Do not let thy horse go! Talk to these monsters who seek our

warm breath and to unseat us quite!

Witch 1 :

O thou art my lovely knight! Who is hag ridden now!

(jumps on Gareth's back)

Gareth:

Vile Witch get thee gone!

Witch 2:

Why such a sweet knight as this would be hard to let go free!

(jumps in front of Owaine's horse in an attempt to spook successfully)

Owaine:

Fiend leave my brave mount untouched by thy foul magic!

Witch 3 :

O would'st summon foul magic? Do our brave knights seek a hex on their heads!

Witch 1:

No! On their backs! **(cackle, cackle)**

Witch 3 leads the other witches in entrapping the knights in a long gauze net.

Witch 2:

They seek the magic of the forest! **(cackle, cackle)**

Owaine and Gareth flail around uttering sounds of exasperation and fury as the witches cackle

Witch 3:

The wisdom of the witches' cauldron! **(cackle, cackle)**

Witch 1:

The wisdom of the monstrous dark! **(cackle, cackle)**

Witch 2:

Witches' witches' wiles! Wild, wild, witches' wiles!

Witches pummel and pinch the entrapped knights

Owaine:

Aargh! Fiends! Hast wisdom in thy magic? Can it be found stored in the forest gloom?

Witch 3:

Such a sweet little knight all ready for the fight! Oh I could kiss thee, squeeze thee and make thee mine!

Gareth:

Thy games are all traps and spookings! We come seeking Merlin, wizard to the King! Not thy foul playing and persecution!

Witch 3 :

We have old, dark wisdom in great store!

Witch 2:

But we'll beat it into thy heads for thou art so hard of hearing!

Witch 1: (shrieking)

So hard of hearing! We'll beat it into thy heads for thou art SO hard of hearing!

Witch 2:

For thou did'st not come seeking us but Merlin! O shallow knight dost not know that Merlin cannot see thee!

Gareth:

What sayest thou? What knowest thou? Witch tell us!

Witch 3:

Merlin's entrapped by a lady's charm and he hath taught her all his magic!

Witch 1 : (cackle, cackle,)

The old wizard hath given it away! Given it away! Given his magic away!

Witch 2:

And he's entrapped as are you all!

Owaine:

By Heaven! I'll take my vow and to the monastery I go right now!

Witch 3:

O stay a while and let us weave a merry dance together!

Owaine:

Gareth! Spur your horse and let us quit this hellish place on the instant! Afore we ourselves are entrapped by such diabolical thralldom as would turn a man to ice!

Gareth:

The amulet! The amulet from Lady Bronwen!.... *(pulls out amulet)*

Avaunt all terrors of the forest and night!

Return into the belly of the darkest cave!

Heart of courage and strength of soul!

The witches reel and screech in horror. The brothers gallop madly away leaving the witches howling loudly.

Gareth:

To Camelot! Our day of questing in this place is quite done!

Scene 8

Arthur comes to another part of the forest and trots around the audience musing

Arthur:

This restless seeking for the riddles' answer brings me no rest and brings me no answer! Strange days indeed! The book of Merlin whereof he often spake was writ, he said, from rivers and streams, rocks and stones, leaves and trees, from the

very movement of winds and the shifting of clouds, from the gossamer web of the lichen green, the tusk of the boar, from the mistletoe's song and a mandrake's shriek. Is there not in nature herself, a wisdom that doth reflect our own very human nature? Is woman so different than man? All our brave knights go seeking and questing and yet is there one man at court who hath asked his own heart "What is it that a man doth most desire?" Merlin I feel thy touch in the quiet places of the trees. Thy voice an ancient stirring where magyck moves and weaves within the sinews of all nature..... I hear thee and feel thee yet!

A monstrous hag appears in front of Arthur on horseback.

Dame Ragnall:

How now good King! Art turned this way into the woods? We are well met in the forest!

Arthur:

I should know thee... lady? What art thou.....

Dame Ragnall :

Why I am Dame Ragnall. I'll tell thee straight I know the quest ye are upon and all thy knights, Gawaine, Peredur, Owaine and his brother.

But none has the answer to the riddle.

Arthur:

Say true.

Dame Ragnall:

If I help thee not, thou art dead good King.

Arthur:

Can'st help? Dost know the answer to the riddle?

Dame Ragnall:

Aye that I do! Grant me one thing and I'll make warranty for thy life; or else for sure thou wilt lose thy head to Gromer Sir Moaner Joure

Arthur:

Tell me what is your meaning? Why, my life is in your hands and I shall promise you anything you wish.

Dame Ragnall:

Forsooth, thou must grant me a knight to wed. His name is Gawaine. I will make thee a covenant that if thy life be not saved by mine answer, my desire shall be in vain; but if mine answer shall save thee thou wilt grant me to be Gawain's wife. Choose now and quickly for it must be so or thou art dead!

Arthur:

Mary mother of God! I may not grant thee to make warrant Sir Gawaine to wed thee! All lieth in him alone.

Dame Ragnall:

Well now go home again fast and speak fair words to Sir Gawain! Thou I am foul, yet am I joyful!

Dame Ragnall turns her gaily bedecked horse around and leaves and Arthur after watching her leave turns his horse and goes in the other direction toward Camelot.

Arthur:

Alas! Woe is me! Another man's life for mine! That such an answer might make me so unfree!

Scene 9 The palace stables**Groom:**

And we have not seen such mud and cuts and bruises as were on those two knights coming back from the Perilous Forest! The horses were all splattered and covered in mud. Old witches they said old witches riding them through the forest. All manner of talk about witches and riddles and seeking the great Merlin. Who hath seen that great wizard these past ten years? He's gone and you can tell it. There's fewer gnomes and goblins around than we used to see. There was a time you'd get help in the stables from the little folk but not so much any more. There's not a whiff in the air of the old magyck. Merlin's gone and they won't find him. He's bewitched and in thrall to his Niniane. That's what the talk is and I for one believe it. Befuddlement and botheration..... It happens to the best of us.....Your majesty!

Arthur rides in and jumps off his horse handing it to the groom

Arthur:

Here, good lad, take thou my steed. I must needs find my nephew the good Gawaine.

Groom:

He hath returned my lord, from his quest today and plays the lute by yon far window while the Lady Myfanwy sings.

Arthur:

Ah good Gawaine! I come to wrest thee from the joys of ladies' good company and bring thee a horrid choice.

Scene 10 Opens on Gawaine and Arthur by a casement in the castle**Gawaine:**

My King there is no question in my mind. Whate'r can be done to mitigate the evil of this challenge I'll do it. I had liefer be dead than thee. I shall wed her and do it again and again, though she were a fiend as foul as Beelzebub!

Arthur:

Gramercy good Gawaine! Of the all the knights that e'r yet I found, thou bearest the flower.

When thou art ready I'll ride forth and ask her for the answer to that question and bring her to thee in the castle here.

Gawaine (kneeling):

My Lord I am ready!

Scene 11

Arthur returns to the same spot and finds Dame Ragnall waiting in the woods

Dame Ragnall:

Well met by moonlight your majesty!

Arthur:

Madam I have the promise of my nephew Gawaine that on the release of the challenge by the answering of this riddle he will be thy husband.

Dame Ragnall:

Oh good Gawaine! An excellent knight indeed!

Arthur:

Aye indeed!

Dame Ragnall:

Sir, now in turn shalt thou know what tis that women desire most of ,high and low. There is one thing in our fantasy, and that now shall ye know:

We desire of men, above all manner of thing to have the sovereignty.

Arthur sits down as if released from some terrible tension and scratches his head.

Arthur:

Verily is that not so...women.. desire.... sovereignty...

Dame Ragnall:

But, now dear king Sir Gromer Growler Gromer Joure will for sure, be marvelous mad when thou gives him this reply and he will curse me hard, for all his pains and labor have been lost. I for one must leave this place for he will be by here very soon. When thou art done I'll meet thee on the road to Camelot.

Dame Ragnall leaves on horseback while Arthur exhausted remains seated. Loud noises and hisses indicate the arrival of something unfriendly

Sir Gromer de Joure:

So king thou art arrived! Let us see what is thy answer!

Arthur:

Here in these books be many answers (aside) If any of these he'll take then may we save my nephew the good Gawaine from such a ghastly marriage.

Sir Gromer de Joure:

Nay, nay king! Thou art a dead man! None of these serves as answer to the riddle! Thou art a dead man!

Arthur:

Abide Sir Gromer! I have one answer more. Above all things women desire sovereignty, for that is to their liking and what they most desire.

Sir Gromer de Joure:

Aargh! I am pinched by little devils! Rage provoked! And she that told thee, I pray to God I see her burn in fire, that was my sister Dame Ragnall, that old scott! God give her shame, else I had made thee full tame..... I give thee good day.

Sir Gromer storms off and Arthur rides in the other direction soon to be met up with by Dame Ragnall.

Dame Ragnall:

Sir King, I am glad thou hast sped well. I told how it would be. Now since I saved your life Gawaine must wed me. That is a full gentle knight. Openly I would be wed, before I allow you to part from me. Ride before and I will follow thee unto court.

Arthur sets off and Dame Ragnall follows him, soon catching up.

Scene 12

They arrive at the gates of Camelot and all the court is there to meet them, pleased to see the king and then downcast and shocked as Dame Ragnall appears close behind to be introduced.

Arthur:

Lord and Ladies of the court this is the Dame Ragnall who hath saved my life

Lady in Distress:

I ne're saw so many boils and warts and follicles of hair in all my days. Was she fathered by a boar and that her skin is all swarthy like a leathery hide?

Arthur:

This is the lady who saved my life!

Half hearted cheers as both Guinevere and Gawaine step forwards. The groom takes Arthur and the Dame's horses.

Guinevere (taking Dame Ragnall's hand):

Dame Ragnall thou art most welcome at court. Saving my husband's life accords thou a place both in mine heart and at our court.

Gawaine:

My lady I welcome thee! As the ocean waves come running to the shore so come I to thee, embracing a strange, new destiny.

Low key mutters and sobs are heard from the knights and ladies as Gawaine kneels and kisses the hand of the Dame. Gawaine and Dame, Guinevere and Arthur freeze, as court gossips, looking at them and circling almost in the manner of pecking birds

Myfanwy:

Oh such a dame is damnation indeed!

Bronwen:

He so fair and she so foul!

Angharad:

And yet such noble embrace from the good Lord Gawaine doth indeed show him loyal, constant and brave.

Bronwen:

Aye a greater nobility hath the Lord Gawaine shown than e'er I might have dreamt and to tell the truth I did dream often of the good Sir Gawaine.

Gareth:

So this is Gawaine's prize! His bride to be! The choice of our lady's man at court is one who might be more at home in the stable me thinks!

Peredur:

Have a care Gareth! Tis out of deep love for the king he makes this choice. Tis not that his eyes and nose be dulled, nor blinded beyond all sense of this lady's lack of charm and unwashed, uncourtly ways.

Owaine:

Tis true, Gawaine hath a great heart indeed!

The court becomes greatly animated as piping music is heard. Gawaine and Dame Ragnall are led off stage while the court bedecks the stage for a wedding. Essentially a frame which has curtain either side suggestive of a four poster bed is placed at the front. Inside this is a simple altar with a chalice. The lighting is changed to a spot on the altar and all the court line up behind to simulate an aisle, ladies on one side and lords on the other.

Gawaine and Dame Ragnall enter, he with a white silk tabard and she in a large white veil and dress. As the couple walk from the back towards the altar ladies weep, as do a couple of lords. Gawaine and Dame Ragnall arrive at the altar, genuflect and turn to each other. Gawaine takes the chalice and offers it to her while Dame Ragnall receives it and offers it back to Gawaine, after both have sipped.

Gawaine:

Madam we are betrothed. I am your husband.

Dame Ragnall:

And I Dame Ragnall, am thy wife! Sweet husband might I beg a kiss!

Gawaine:

In this place thou seek a kiss! Now thou would have a kiss! Why so thou shall and as thy husband I embrace thee fully!

Gawaine embraces her and lifts up her veil only to see a beautiful woman. He gasps.

Gawaine:

By're Lady! How is it possible that I am plighted to the most beauteous maid I e'er did see!

Dame Ragnall:

Sweet Gawaine thou hast broken a spell so that I may be returned to my former beauty. However, the spell that the old witch cast upon me means that I may be beautiful only by day and so for all the court to see, or only at night when we lie together as man and wife. Thou art my husband and thou may choose!

Gawaine:

Lady it is not for me to choose! To have power over thy beauty which I seek only to enjoy. It is for thee to choose how you would seek to be, to enjoy thine own beauty by day or by night!

Dame Ragnall:

O noble Gawaine! I scarcely dared to dream that such largesse and nobility might live in this world! Thou hast broken the spell entirely! In giving me this freedom from such a generous hearted chivalry thou hast truly granted this woman sovereignty. The spell is quite undone and I am thine for all the hours of day and night, in joy and beauty, goodness and deep devotion.

Gawaine and Dame Ragnall turn towards the court and then lights flood the entire court. Cheers go up amid gasps and the couple are brought into the center of the court amid much merriment. The entire company circles in a dance until the music stops and Arthur and Gunivere turn outwards towards the audience.

Arthur:

Friends this happy day is done and let us now turn towards our beds!

What we have seen here should fill all our hearts and gladden the dreams of all sleepyheads.

Sleep we safe this glorious night, thanks to the action of this one brave knight.

Gawaine's noble and chivalrous heart brought light out of the darkness; shadows recede a little longer and the glorious sun doth shine upon us and make this a golden time in Camelot!

Company applauds as the king leads Guinivere, followed by Gawaine and Dame, Myfanwy and Owaine, Gareth and Bronwen, Peredur and Angharad through the 4 poster bed. Company of the court exits to back of hall while the groom comes on to close the curtains.

Taliesin:

The story is told and the hart run its course

Like stones smoothly polished

Arrows all spent

When man trusts woman then the dance can begin

And the circle of life finds its glorious spin!

Music pipes up and the entire company comes back on through the four poster to riotous applause.

Cast List

Taliesin:

Groom:

Sir Gareth:

Sir Owaine:

Sir Peredur:

Sir Gawaine:

Lady Myfanwy:

Lady Angharad:

Lady Bronwen :

Queen Guinivere:

King Arthur:

Lady in Distress:

Messenger:

Sir Gromer Somer Joure:

Dame Ragnall:

Witch #1:

Witch # 1:

Addendum #1:

Insert A;

Myfanwy:

For sure my Lord, thou hast been engaged to bring a suit to me that is not thine but thy brother's. Forgive me but in my father's castle at Llanllanrdech in Wales, we were ever free spoken. I find thy mode both quaint and indirect. Does not Owaine himself seek to know me better?

Angharad:

Thou art a wild stallion, Myfanwy!

Guinivere

Watch out Lord Owaine for the strong and rustic tongue of my Lady Myfanwy. She hath the wild ways of the Welsh borderlands and eschews our courtly modes of politeness as foolish and vain. Yet she sings with a voice that doth charm us all; she hath been endowed with the voice of a true songbird!

Addendum #2

Gareth:

.....seek our warm breath and to unseat us quite.

Witch 1 :

O thou art my lovely knight! Who is hag ridden now!

(jumps on Gareth's back)

Gareth:

Vile Witch get thee gone!

Witch 2:

Why such a sweet knight as this would be hard to let go free!

(jumps in front of Owaine's horse in an attempt to spook successfully)

Owaine:

Fiend leave my brave mount untouched by thy foul magic!

Witch 3 :

O would'st summon foul magic? Do our brave knights seek a hex on their heads!

Witch 1:

No! On their backs! **(cackle, cackle)**

Witch 3 leads the other witches in entrapping the knights in a long gauze net.

Witch 2:

They seek the magic of the forest! **(cackle, cackle)**

Owaine and Gareth flail around uttering sounds of exasperation and fury as the witches cackle

Witch 3:

The wisdom of the witches' cauldron! **(cackle, cackle)**

Witch 1:

The wisdom of the monstrous dark! **(cackle, cackle)**

Witch 2:

Witches' witches' wiles! Wild, wild, witches' wiles!

Witches pummel and pinch the entrapped knights

Owaine:

Aargh! Fiends! Hast wisdom in thy magic? Can it be found stored in the forest gloom?

Witch 3:

Such a sweet little knight all ready for the fight! Oh I could kiss thee, squeeze thee and make thee mine!

Gareth:

Thy games are all traps and spookings! We come seeking Merlin, wizard to the King! Not thy foul playing and persecution!

Witch 3 :

We have old, dark wisdom in great store!

Witch 2:

But we'll beat it into thy heads for thou art so hard of hearing!

Witch 1: (shrieking)

So hard of hearing! We'll beat it into thy heads for thou art SO hard of hearing!

Witch 2:

For thou did'st not come seeking us but Merlin! O shallow knight dost not know that Merlin cannot see thee!

Gareth:

What sayest thou? What knowest thou? Witch tell us!

Witch 3:

Merlin's entrapped by a lady's charm and he hath taught her all his magic!

Witch 1 : (cackle, cackle,)

The old wizard hath given it away! Given it away! Given his magic away!

Witch 2:

And he's entrapped as are you all!

Owaine:

By Heaven! I'll take my vow and to the monastery I go right now!

Witch 3:

O stay a while and let us weave a merry dance together!

Owaine:

Gareth! Spur your horse and let us quit this hellish place on the instant! Afore we ourselves are entrapped by such diabolical thralldom as would turn a man to ice!

Gareth:

The amulet! The amulet from Lady Bronwen!

Guinivere:

Love, relentless fire with in the human heart, reverence for the feminine... as the way to redemption and restoration of paradise on earth.

Scene in process: symbol of classic courtly love themes