

ENID AND GEREINT

John P. Tuttle on A Romance
in Arthur's Kingdom

Several of the legends recounted in *The Mabinogion*, a collection of Welsh folktales developed and culminated in medieval times, include characterizations of King Arthur or “Emperor Arthur” who ruled over several sub-monarchs. In these legends, Arthur is not really the protagonist, seldom having even a prominent role in the stories. Yet, the stories themselves stand up well as rather typical chivalrous quests, and readers can find virtue in them if they dig deep enough.

One of these tales, “Gereint and Enid,” presents an endearing romance between the title characters in the setting of an Arthurian kingdom. Here Arthur is shown as a hunter, a gentleman, a leader, and a true friend. Gereint – a young, strong-headed knight in the king's court and in the king's favor – goes gallivanting across the land. Through acts of daring, he meets his bride-to-be. The rest of the story shows how his love, and his trust in her, are tested.

After Arthur's wife Gwenhwyvar suffers insult and her maid a wounding blow, Gereint determines to exact revenge on the mysterious knight responsible for these slights. Gereint pursues the armor-clad figure who in other realms is known as the Knight of the Kestrel. This title comes from his victory in a jousting tournament,

the prize for which is a kestrel, or hawk, won for the victor's fair lady.

It turns out this tournament is about to be held once more. At the same time, in this new country Gereint has traveled to, he meets the Earl Niwl (whose earldom had been usurped by his nephew) and his family. The old earl, “a hoary-haired man,” is dressed in the clothes afforded by poverty, his wife and daughter clad in rags. Not only does he feel compassion toward Niwl's circumstances, Gereint also finds Enid, Niwl's daughter, an attractive young woman. Gereint conceives to kill two kestrels with one stone as it were. He plans to defeat this Knight of the Kestrel at his own game and win the hand of Enid, which he promptly does.

To get an idea of what Gereint thinks of Enid, we can look to their first encounter in which the knight is taken aback by her beauty and goodness and she, for her part, proves obedient to her father and docile to this newcomer from Arthur's court:

There was also a girl [Enid] near by, wearing a shift and mantle that were very old and beginning to tear, and he [Gereint] was certain he had never seen a girl as full of abundant grace and beauty as she. The man [Niwl] said to the girl, “Tonight this gentleman has for his horse no groom but yourself.” “I will wait upon him and his horse as best I can.”¹

We learn about Enid as well as Gereint's feelings for her, how he considers her as a woman and as a person. Enid possesses the virtue of obedience – here to her father and later to Gereint. Gereint is not perfect as is

¹ “Gereint and Enid” in *The Mabinogion*, trans. Jeffrey Gantz (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 264.

made clear by the story. But notice his standards for weighing Enid's merits. The knight focuses on her physical beauty *and* her personality exuding goodness, virtue, grace. It is not fine garments and rich jewelry that give her worth. She has something noble and inherent to herself. The way Gereint sees her is not the same way his peers do back at Arthur's court. There "Arthur went to see the girl, and he and his companions and everyone in the court welcomed her, and all were certain that *if her dress and appearance were to match her beauty*, they would never have seen a lovelier girl."²

Arthur and his knights agree with Gereint that Enid is beautiful, but that a touch-up in her appearance and a change in wardrobe would make her better. Their view of Enid focuses on what could be added to seemingly increase her value as a woman. But it's not even her value as a woman that they are interested in. Instead, they critique what attributes would improve her physical appeal, what would give pleasure to the eyes. Gereint, on the other hand, was content with Enid even in poverty.

Perhaps Gereint's is a true love? Surely it is influenced by other motives, like repairing the dishonor brought against Lady Gwenhwyvar. It is mingled with politics and vengeance and one man's view of public honor. But his desire for Enid also appears good-natured and genuine. In other stories collected in *The Mabinogion*, male characters occasionally chase after a plethora of women as their story progresses or they use deception to get with a woman. Gereint is popular enough and powerful enough that he could have easily

² "Gereint and Enid," 273.

taken other women as prizes. Perhaps his chivalrous conduct runs deep. Because, just as Enid's natural beauty is enough for him, Gereint is likewise content with her in marriage and with her alone. He upholds singular devotion to Enid.

Gereint's renown grows. He goes out on his own, helps govern another realm (while remaining in good standing with Arthur), and amasses his own court and retinue. All the while, he enjoys his adventures and tournaments. Yet, as time wears on, he begins "to love being alone in his chamber with his wife" and does little else. This preoccupation takes away from Gereint's energies devoted to governing. Eventually, Erbin, who bestowed on Gereint the responsibility of ruling, asks Enid if she took her husband's attention away from ruling the realm deliberately. To the contrary, Enid confesses she never intended it. What happens next leads to a miserable period in Enid's relationship with her husband.

One morning as Gereint lies gently resting in bed, Enid looked at him with love and:

gazed at the magnificence of his good looks and said, "Woe is me, if on my account these arms and chest are losing the fame and fighting ability they once possessed," and at that the tears streamed down until they fell on his chest.³

It is a touching scene. But Enid didn't know Gereint stirred from his sleep. Overhearing her anguish and not understanding the intent of her words, Gereint jumps to

³ "Gereint and Enid," 278.

the conclusion that his wife considers his strength to be waning and desires another man. His trust in her is weakened by this perception, and he “lost all peace of mind.” This disturbing development spurs Gereint to take extreme action. He thinks Enid has come to see him as weak. So he forces her to accompany him under strict directives as he embarks on new escapades to flaunt his masculinity and virility. He tells her to ride ahead of him and to speak not a word. As she did earlier in the tale, Enid shows obedience – even when it comes to her husband's irrational demands. It's not exactly a second honeymoon.

When silence does not reign between them, Enid breaks it (thus also breaking Gereint's order to not speak) whenever she sees and overhears a knight or group of men who seek to overpower her husband. She continually gallops back to Gereint to warn him of any oncoming marauders, each time thinking, “Though he may kill me, I will speak, lest he be killed without warning.”⁴ Even though she has good intentions, her husband grows angry with her every time she does this. At this point in the story, Gereint's chivalry is always gleaming and victorious, but his subtler, more genuine and selfless virtues are neglected. Meanwhile, Enid offers an outstanding example of selfless love, what the Greeks would call *agape*, shared with her spouse even when he is not at his best. This is a Christ-like love. Enid fears she might provoke Gereint's anger to the point of slaying her. But that knowledge does not diminish the love she has for him, nor intimidate her in her decision to warn him of danger. In other words, she is not afraid

⁴ “Gereint and Enid,” 279.

of dying for her beloved – even *at the hands of* her beloved. This is exactly what Jesus did in His salvific sacrifice on the Cross: He died for love of us, and it was we who put Him to death. He died at the hands of those He loves. Even on the Cross, He showed His love for His executioners: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”⁵

Enid's exceptional love is put to a greater test later in their travels. In another country, they encounter a deceitful earl who immediately fancies having Enid for his own. In a devilish sort of way, the earl tempts Enid. First, he says traveling with her husband must be a joyless errand. But she says it “is not unpleasant.” Then the earl suggests it is fitting for her to have maids serve her on this journey to which she replies, “I would rather follow him [Gereint] than have servants and handmaidens.” The earl remains in earnest and presently gets right to the point, suggesting that Enid run off with him. Enid, being as innocent as a dove and wise as a serpent, encourages the earl and sets a trap for him. They make arrangements for him to come and whisk Enid off to a supposedly better life. Enid soon tells Gereint of the plan, warning him in advance, and together they leave before the Brown Earl's arrival. The earl comes to the place where they were staying only to find that Enid and Gereint are gone.

Enraged, the earl sends his men after Gereint, who vanquishes every attacker. The earl finally confronts Gereint himself and is thrown over the back of his horse. After the fall, he begs Gereint for mercy. Gereint certainly has a strong motive to slay the man right

⁵ Luke 23:34 (NABRE).

where he sits; he had planned to take his wife and defile their relationship. Yet, for all the shortcomings of his rash and judgmental nature, Gereint does show mercy and lets the man live.

Before “Gereint and Enid” comes to an end, and following an encounter with another wayward earl, the author notes that Gereint is sorrowful over the harm others did to Enid. He is also sad because of his blindness toward Enid's righteousness. Gereint concedes in his heart that she had been in the right all along. The rest of the story portrays a somewhat humbled Gereint, although he is just as mighty as before.

Not only does this tale have a happy ending, it offers Christians an example of strife within a marriage and the virtue needed to work through the rough patches. Part of the obligation of marriage – of conjugal love rightly ordered – is fidelity.⁶ Enid certainly shows this trait as does Gereint. Surprisingly, for being a man so thoroughly caught up in his own masculine identity, he lets fear control many of his actions. This is what leads to a break in his trust in Enid and a diminishing of the love he extends to her. While Gereint's virtues crumble, Enid's shine forth brilliantly: charity, obedience, faithfulness. When it comes to the interpersonal union of marriage, each spouse “should ‘love the person complete with all his or her virtues and faults . . .’”⁷ Gereint certainly has virtues, but much of the story is about an ugly moment in his life where he fails to live up to those virtues. This, however, allows Enid to display the virtue of total love, or charity, in which she

⁶ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2363.

⁷ Edward Sri, *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* (Cincinnati: Servant, 2015), 60.

loves and respects her husband even when he is treating her in an unworthy manner.

But all is not lost for Gereint. By the end of the tale, he realizes he was in the wrong and Enid in the right. And in owning that fault he shows humility. The trust between the knight and his wife is restored. “Gereint and Enid” is an example of a lesser-known bit of Arthurian folklore that presents an over-the-top scenario of an imperfect marriage. That troubled marriage nevertheless grows richer and deeper because of the total love a wife has for her husband and the humility of a husband in admitting his mistakes.

Bibliography

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