

Wildwood

South East Qld.

I've just returned from a walk on the banks of Lake Samsonvale, not far from where I live. As I ambled along I was thinking about a paper I'm preparing on *Sir Perceval of Galles*. This text has profoundly influenced my life (and not just because it was the central text for my PhD thesis!) and I realised that a significant part of its impact relates to the centrality of water, and of nature - the well and the fell - to the story.

Many scholars disparage *Sir Perceval of Galles* as just a pale reflection of Chrétien's *Le Roman de Perceval* or von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. There may be some truth in this, but for me it is counterbalanced by the way in which these two texts demonstrate the misogyny characteristic of their age in relation to the female protagonists and, specifically, to Perceval's mother. *Sir Perceval of Galles*, however, exhibits an ambivalence towards Acheflour, her value system and her life choices - simplicity and pacifism - which I find very interesting.

Sir Perceval of Galles tells the story of the princess Acheflour, sister to king Arthur, and of her son Perceval. When Acheflour's husband is killed in a tournament, she vows to leave the court and bring up her child away from the violence which left her without a husband and her son without a father. She takes her baby son into the woods, where they live by a well, and she rears him in harmony with nature. In fiction, as in real life, the best-laid plans sometimes go awry, and Acheflour's dream is shattered when Perceval leaves her to pursue his own aspiration of knighthood. However, in the end all is resolved and both Acheflour and Perceval live happily ever after - albeit separately, for Perceval goes on crusade to Jerusalem and Acheflour joins the royal household of her erstwhile daughter-in-law in Maidenland.

Acheflour has been a role model for me in many ways. As a feminist, a mother, and a budding environmentalist, I am fascinated by Acheflour. She's a strong, independent woman, a wise mother and a religious free spirit. Her decision to remove herself and her son from the strictures of the Arthurian court, for a simpler life in close contact with nature, resonates with my own desire for a life aligned to the values of the natural world.

John Speirs, one of my favourite medieval scholars, contended that in earlier versions of this poem Acheflour was a water fairy. While this appeals to me - my childhood was filled with tales of fairies - I also believe that she demonstrates attributes of both an earth goddess and a water goddess, and that's partly how I relate to her. This is my own personal response to the poem, rather than a strictly literary-critical one, for *Sir Perceval of Galles*, for me, is more than merely a text for analysis. It is a point of entry to the world and values of the earth. That entry point is focused on two lines of text, which encapsulate Acheflour's choice, and her dream for herself and her son.

The text says: "He was fostered in the fell". What comes to my mind here is the Celtic tradition of fosterage where the foster mother became very significant, often more so than the biological mother. Traditionally, a boy was removed from the home of his parents (from his mother) and sent to fosterage elsewhere, often at the court of the king (that is, into patriarchal fosterage). In this text, Perceval is removed *by* his mother *from* the royal court, and kept at her side, while being also "fostered" in the fell. That is, he

was fostered in/by the earth, by mother earth, while remaining physically and emotionally close to his biological mother, Acheflour.

The text also says: "He drank water from the well". This well is one of the defining features of both Acheflour and her son, but it appears primarily at the margins of the text, at beginning and end, where Perceval drinks from it. It is the point from which Perceval departs and to which he returns. It is at the margins of the text, but it is at the centre of Perceval's and Acheflour's lives.

Similarly the well, and water, is at the centre of my life. I have read the text of *Sir Perceval of Galles* countless times. There are some images which have imprinted themselves on my mind and to which I return again and again. One of the most dominant of these images, which has stayed with me over the years, is that of water, which sustained Acheflour and Perceval, and beside which they dwelt (like Wordsworth's Lucy).

As I have become ever more committed to the earth, I have sought to emulate Acheflour and her life by the well, believing that a closer relationship to nature will lead to a deeper understanding of the basic truths of life. Through my many years of reading about Acheflour, her commitment to her own values and her choice for the woodland world have challenged me to action and to the search for a place of woods and water. At every opportunity I sought out places by fresh running water where I could spend periods of time in reflection. When suitable places could not be found, or time made available, I filled large glass bowls with water and put them in my sitting room. My nature meditations invariably focused on the element water, with its life-giving, refreshing, cleansing power and its hidden strength.

Today I live on deeply wooded land beside a fresh flowing river. Once the decision to move from the suburbs to more rural living was made, every weekend and evening was spent looking for the perfect spot, a quiet place with grass, trees and a stream; the house was a secondary consideration. After months of frustrating and often disappointing searching the highways and byways of south-east Queensland, a real estate agent suggested this property. We met him at the gate and he headed for the front door of the house. I asked if we could see the water first and, with a somewhat puzzled look, he led the way down the long grassy slopes to the river's edge. There was no easy access to the water through the riverine forest, but I scrambled down until I could touch the water. It was magical: a wide deep pool of clear water overhung on both banks by huge blackbean trees. The surface of the water reflected the trees, the sky and the clouds, with floating leaves and blossoms adding texture and depth to the image. I was captivated, and knew that this was truly a dream come true. Only then did I ask to see inside the house (which was dark and enclosed, as if hiding from the world outside, but that could be fixed).

Within weeks this wonderful place of water and trees had become home. As we slowly developed a relationship to the trees, the birds and the animals with which we shared the land and the river, we felt that the property deserved to be named appropriately. Family and friends were canvassed. After exploring countless possibilities, it became known as Wildwood. Not long after, as I reread the tale of *Sir Perceval of Galles*, I encountered four occurrences of "wild wood" or "wild woods" in the poem. Perhaps my unconscious had recognised the relationship between this Australian wooded place and Acheflour's medieval woodland world long before my conscious mind made the connection.

Life at Wildwood has evolved, as much as possible, in harmony with nature. Here I am nurtured by the earth: I am "fostered in the fell". Here I am nourished by the earth: I drink "water from the well" (both figuratively and literally - with no reticulated water at Wildwood, we drink only rain water from our own tanks). These words have become something of a mantra for my life. With their simple lyrical beauty, they have the power to move me into a deeply reflective mode. Wildwood is the locus for this reflection.

At Wildwood the days follow a timeless pattern. Morning is announced by an alarm clock call, courtesy of that brilliant mimic, the butcher bird. Under the trees the ground is pocked by evidence of bandicoots scratching for worms. Sometimes at dawn or dusk a platypus may be seen in the river, its spatulate bill unmistakable as it glides silently. At midday a stunted forest of tortoise heads can be seen in the water, as they come to the surface to breathe. In the late afternoons the flash and screech of flocks of white cockatoos fill the air. The nights are alive with the eerie cries of curlews echoing in the darkness, the clicking of geckos, the patter of possums on the roof. The frogmouth owls, which play at statues all day, whoosh through the darkness. At Wildwood each day I am nurtured "in the fell", I am nourished "from the well".

At Wildwood in the spring the jacarandas burst into bloom, carpeting the grass with purple. A newly-emerged koala joey may be seen clinging bravely to its mother's back. Kookaburra chicks in the hollow of a tall tree exhaust their parents with demands for food, their juvenile laughter sounding less like the full-bellied chortle of their parents, and more like an old rusty lawn mower. The brush turkey builds his mound from the leaf litter at the river's edge, raking the ground bare with his talons; the females hover anxiously, awaiting the moment they will entrust their eggs to his tender care. My senses quicken in response to the burgeoning life around me. At Wildwood in spring I am fostered in the fell, I drink water from the well.

At Wildwood in the summer the river is a refuge from the subtropical heat; floating on the water watching the clouds drift by has become a regular Sunday afternoon ritual. The fish jump lazily, plopping noisily as if they, too, enjoy this time. The resident python sleeps in a nearby tree, its long body looped gracefully on the branch, its discarded skin caught on the leaves below. The screech of the cicadas cuts the air at noon. The gum trees split their bark as the moist heat triggers a growth spurt; it falls in tattered rags, littering the grass all around. My heart pulses with the slow, rhythmic beat of the earth. At Wildwood in summer I am fostered in the fell, I drink water from the well.

At Wildwood in the autumn the sunlight filters through the eucalypts as their leaves grow sparse and thin. The liquidambars are transformed into glorious columns of red, gold and brown. The magpie chicks hatched in the spring are now adolescents strutting boldly behind their parents. The sea eagle patrols the river, swooping to harvest an unsuspecting fish. The days grow mild, the evenings cool. The topknot pigeons settle for sleep a little earlier each day, cuddling and cooing in the lillypilly tree. My spirit soars at the quiet elegance of this gentle season. At Wildwood in autumn I am fostered in the fell, I drink water from the well.

At Wildwood in the winter a soft mist rises from the river in the early morning, creating an enchanted landscape. The solitary hare leaves tracks on the dewy grass. Late in the season the westerly winds sweep across the land, blowing away the last remnants of summer's warmth. The bare branches of the jacaranda tree form a sharp silhouette

against the pale blue sky. The snakes vanish to their winter hideout; the possums sleep snugly in the hollow trees. My body slows with the stilling of nature and the settling of the earth. At Wildwood in winter I am fostered in the fell, I drink water from the well.

At Wildwood I encounter most fully the mystery of the earth that is the beginning and the end of my journey.

- Patricia Rose -

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