

The Loathly Lady

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Though I am not a medievalist, some years ago I had occasion to teach Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and was simply bowled over. Its treatment of the misunderstandings between men and women could have been written yesterday. Before very long, song lyrics had started forming in my head, and ultimately an opera libretto came into being called *The Loathly Lady*.

The main character in Chaucer's tale is a wayward knight who has "a twelve-month and a day" to discover what women want most—or die. In *The Loathly Lady*, the knight uses his year to conduct interviews with a series of women—Shakespeare's Titania, Sheherezade, Jane Austen's Emma, the Lady of Shalott, Eliza Doolittle, and Virginia Woolf. They each provide answers, but it is not until a Loathly Lady appears that the knight discovers the truth, and that is a story in itself.

By 2005, I had found a fine composer, Paul Richards, who set to work. I had started imagining the opera as an animated film and asked a friend, the artist John Kindness, to draw it. With his wonderful still images and storyboards (and the advice of Joshua Mosley), the animator Erinn Hagerty created the animation pilot reproduced here.

The opera is now fully composed and orchestrated. In the scenes set in medieval Camelot, the music evokes the ars nova idioms of Chaucer's day and is played on shawms, rebecs, dulcians, recorders, and other early instruments. The knight's encounters with characters from other periods and cultures reflect the music of their time. Viola da gambas accompany Titania in a Monteverdian aria; Emma performs a country air to a fortepiano; Sheherezade sings a tango to a gypsy violin; and Merlin and Freud pass in and out of each other's musical idioms in their debates over the merits of magic versus psychoanalysis in the knight's therapy.

The opera will premiere in Philadelphia on April 1, 2009 with a cast including: soprano Julianne Baird in the title role; baritone Tom MeglIORanza as the knight; countertenor Drew Minter as Merlin; and Susan Hellauer, Jacqueline Horner, and Ruth Cunningham as the knight's informants. The instrumental accompaniment is provided by two of America's foremost early-music ensembles: *Parthenia*, a viol consort, and *Piffaro*, a Renaissance wind band. The conductor will be Gary Thor Wedow.