

The Queen's Chastity

Murder Most Medieval

by Tony Geraghty, 1932–

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“BY THE GRACE OF ALMIGHTY GOD, BE THIS SAD HISTORIE NOT INCONTINENTLY REVEALED ’TIL YET TWO MILLENNIA HAVE PAST—requiescat in pace.”

Queen Eleanor’s tomb at Llanthony, with its cryptic inscription, had long been an object of speculation among scholars. Now that it was opened to reveal the remains not of one, but three human skeletons, seven centuries after her presumed death, medievalists revived a longstanding dispute. The matter was of little constitutional importance now. Yet there was no

shortage of academic dinosaurs ready to make war about it on the Internet, from Honolulu to the London Library in Saint James's. Both factions believed it was important to know the truth. To express the matter somewhat indelicately, did the Queen of England cuckold her husband, the future King Edward I, while he was crusading in the Holy Land from 1270 to 1272? Forensic science could only confirm that one skeleton was that of a woman in her early forties. The other two—almost identical, apart from differences of gender—were in their twenties and could have been twins. The skull of one of these people was missing. In its place was that of a bird of prey. The younger skeletons were, perhaps, her offspring (the DNA said as much), but to admit that would have been to concede that the queen was indeed unfaithful, a theory peddled vigorously by the Honolulu Faction and passionately opposed by the London Library Faction, united by their belief in Eleanor's virtue. The London faction asserts that Eleanor of Castille was with Edward all the way to the Holy Land and back.

It is late afternoon in autumn. The forest air blends the odors of rutting deer, horse dung, and wood smoke from the charcoal burner, piled up irreverently at the center of a circle of standing stones.

“Did!”

“Didn't.”

“Did!”

Two children, a boy and a girl, their faces and bare feet blackened from a life built around the process of burning wood, face one another like quarrelsome cats.

“How, then?” says the girl at last, a nervous finger curled into her long hair. “How did he come back from the dead like you say?”

“It was a manacle,” the boy retorts, one tiny fist punching into the palm of the other hand, just as he had seen the priest at Christmas. “Sweet Jesu came back through a manacle after they nailed him to the tree.”

“Well, I don't believe you,” the girl says. She turns clockwise, pirouetting to show her nakedness beneath the worn dress. “I believe in Green Man. I believe in the Old Religion.” Sticking her tongue out for good measure, she adds, “And the Moon Goddess.”

“Well, then,” the boy shouts at her, his eyes glowing through the smoke-dirt on his face, “you will go to Hell and be damned for ever-and-ever-Amen.”

Watching from among the clustered, conspiratorial sessile oaks, a trio of women turn to one another. Two smile indulgently, but the third, a peasant, casts her eyes down, murmuring, “They shame me, Ma'am... If you wish to—”

“Not at all, Jenny Blackthorn.” The Queen's smile does not conceal her pallor or the deadly shadows beneath her tired eyes. “Here”—giving her a small bag of jingling coins—“take them to the market and buy shoes for them. Soon it will be Hallowe'en.” Her hand shakes, but not because of cold.

Eleanor's companion, the taller of the two, buxom and glowing in a red gown that hampers her on horseback, even riding sidesaddle, whispers, “Ma'am... We are far from home. Your escort will wonder...” She touches the Royal arm, a

breach of protocol permitted only to a trusted lady of the bedchamber. Reluctantly, Eleanor allows herself to be led away, stifling what might be a cough or a sob, or both.

Browne to Long: Dear Long—What do you make of Queen Eleanor's deathbed confession?

—Browne, Honolulu.

Long to Browne: Dear Browne—Just another smear, started by Giraldus Cambrensis, working off his old grudge against Edward. He never forgave the King for refusing to confirm his election as Bishop of Saint David's. His way of hitting back was to tell the world that the King was a cuckold.

—Long, London.

"FATHER, FORGIVE ME, FOR I have sinned a mortal sin, a sin of impurity, and would be shriven now my hour is come."

The candle flickers. The rosary lies inert among the Queen's dying fingers.

"Be at peace, my child. Our Lord God is ever merciful. He died that we may live."

The voice of Bishop Gerald of Wales, lately returned from Ireland with young Prince John and preparing his great recruitment for the Crusade through the Welsh Marches, soothes Eleanor out of this life with a voice that is soft as the silk lining of her coffin. "But make your confession whilst there is yet time."

A little way off, a loose floorboard squeaks. Gerald raises a cautionary finger, silencing the intrusion. Two men—tall Prince John, his hooked nose scarred from jousting, and his inseparable companion and Clerk, Dark John, small and sinuous as a marmoset—strain to hear the words that follow.

"Father this is hard... hard. My husband Edward, having taken the Cross, was at Acre. Word came that he had died of a green wound. But it was false, a calumny, the work of the Evil One. I was comforted one night in my grief. Even now I dare not speak his name for it were mortal sin even were I in truth the widow I had thought myself to be."

She coughs. The side of her mouth stains pink bubbles, then smooth crimson as if an invisible artist has her as his paint pallet.

"So much blood there was. I was delivered a month before Edward disembarked at Southampton."

Her eyes roll back into her skull. Prince John, from the other side of the room, hisses: "The name! What is the Bastard's name? Is he a Pretender?"

Bishop Gerald's finger again ordains silence, though he, also, is disturbed by the political implications of this revelation. A Pretender? Where? Supported by what? An army of peasants, perhaps? These are dangerous times and Wales is still untamed.

The Queen's eyes open, fixed on the candle as if she sees hellfire looming.

"My son, my firstborn, was one of two. One son, one daughter, like puppies in a litter. John was later, the true son of his father.

"What became of them, child?"

"Jenny Blackthorn..."

The last flicker of life flows away as the candle gutters. Gerald closes her staring eyes, makes the Sign of the Cross on her forehead, and kneels to pray for her departing soul.

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: But Gerald wrote of twins, with the superstitious horror surrounding the phenomenon at that time. Why would he complicate a false story without cause?

Long, London, to Browne, Honolulu: Further evidence, in itself, that the Queen—and by extension, Edward—was cursed. He even hints at incest and suggests that the boy carried the “Mark of Cain” on his face (a single, linked eyebrow). All nonsense, of course.

THE MOURNING BELL TOLLS on a biting winter morning at Llanthony Priory, that huge, grey, graven emptiness that not even a host of gargoyles, nor even the gaping sheila-na-gig, can populate: a place that shudders under the perpetual storms that rage on the Black Mountain just above it. The choir sings its requiem for Eleanor. An angry Prince, his nose red with cold, his chain mail heavy with ice after the long ride from Gloucester, stamps stone flags either from frustration or cold, or both, ignoring the burial service.

The service over, he summons Bishop Gerald.

“Your Grace, lookie-here. Before our period of mourning is done, certes before our coronation, we will have the Bastard found.”

Gerald notes with disquiet, but not surprise, that Prince John has already adopted the royal “We” instead of the humble, human “I.”

“What is your advice?”

“This is not a matter for spiritual counsel, Sire. Perhaps”—he nods in his shrewd, political fashion toward Black John—“perhaps your loyal Clerk would know where to find Jenny Blackthorn if she yet live? Black John knew the Forest of Dean well as a boy, before the seminarians sent him to study in France to remove him from that sinister place of Devil worship where all who enter do so at risk to their immortal souls.” Crossing himself, he continues: “In Gloucester it is rumored that one of that name succored twins: a boy and a girl, and that the same Jenny Blackthorn, the wife of a charcoal burner, was once visited by a fine gentlewoman who gave her money.”

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: And what are we to make of “Black John,” the Prince’s confidant?

Long, London, to Browne, Honolulu: The Prince’s creature, no more. European history is replete with witch-finders.

THE TUMBLING HAMLETS CLING to the edge of the Forest, as if afraid to venture far from it or enter the dark, unmarked green ways known only to the furtive people of the interior, the aboriginal Celts. Doors shudder beneath blows of mailed fists. Dogs bark and babies scream and puke as the gnomish Black John and his posse storm like Norman centaurs into the huddled settlements. The villeins are arranged along one stone wall—or hawthorn hedge if no stone stands—the women at another. They face the wall to be kicked, pushed, or lashed if they complain.

“Where is Jenny Blackthorn?”

“Dead, sire, these ten years an” more.”

“What of her brats?”

“The boy was taken by the Bishop’s people to be priested, just before Jenny died of the red mushroom.”

“And the girl?”

The villagers are silent, as if waiting. The posse turns, sensing something, as if stalked by a wood nymph. A slight, graceful woman dressed in faded green, her black hair wantonly about her shoulders, approaches them on bare feet. Her eyes are grey and the dark eyebrows meet above them. About her neck she wears a torque of gold. There are other marvels. On her left, gloved wrist rests a fine goshawk, its talons held in leathern jesses, the eyes masked by a hood.

“I am Cerridwen, daughter of Jenny Blackthorn.”

The voice is surprisingly low. It carves patterns of sound that could make a man—and some women—drunk with the melody, most particularly the name, in which each syllable is spoken separately, like a drumbeat: “Cer-rid-wen.”

“What would you want of me?”

Now the eyes are grey-green, changing, chameleonlike, with the shifting patterns of illusory light in an enchanted land. And they flash toward Black John with dangerous recognition. “Twere not love potions, I ween. Not twixt us.”

Her laughter saws at the sinews of the centaurs about her. Black John, fear his companion, taps the arm of his giant escort. “Take her.”

As they close on her, she slips off the hawk’s hood and lofts the bird into the air. It circles over the posse, shrieking, and she responds: “Fly! Fly, my beauty!” With a last unearthly call, the sound of the very soul ascending, it soars, still circling, leather jesses still dangling from its legs, into invisibility. Later, they said this was no ordinary bird of prey, nor even a falcon of the hunting sort, trained by man, but one of her familiars. Certainly, she had a way with animals.

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: The real mystery here is the identity of this woman and what it was that made her so important. She was no possible threat to Prince John or his spurious claim to the throne.

Long, London, to Browne: Bread and circuses perhaps? As you say, there was no Pretender only the fear of one. But once the hunt was up and running, there had to be a quarry, even if it was some poor superstitious hag hauled out of her bed of cabbages to be hanged for the fun of it.

THE INQUIRY BEGINS. No lack of witnesses this Beltane eve to attest that dark things have happened the year past in the gloomy Forest of Dean: babies stillborn and beasts aborting—agues and boils and the falling sickness afflicting the innocent; curdled milk and chimneys blocked by jackdaws. The procession of hard-luck stories through the echoing hall of Hereford Castle, beside the salmonful Wye, is a jolly romp, with mead and bread for all—a fair, my dear, with the hope of more entertainment to come and the start of better things after. Would they use the ducking stool? Or even swim the witch? Not yet, for no witness was found who had seen Cerridwen at her exercise... Not yet. Besides, she is here present, and who would denounce her to her face, she who has cured so many with her magic? What might befall if we did?

“I cannot swear on my oath it was her doing, Sire.” Black John twists restlessly in his seat. It is a fine wooden seat, almost like a throne, that elevates him above the common people. “Tell it to me again, your history,” he orders the witness.

Cerridwen, her wrists bound before her and legs tied likewise, squats with her back to a pillar behind him, out of his eye. The witness repeats his story as he faces her, avoiding her gaze.

Long, London, to Browne: There was also a genuine Jear of "Sathan" and his works including sorcery, heresy, and what the writer Perkins described later as "the damned Art of Witchcraft." Witchcraft was tolerated through much of Christendom until Rome linked it to heresy for internal, political reasons at about the time this trial took place.

Browne to Long, London: Or even earlier in some places. Remember the "Canon Episcopoy"? All that stuff about "some wicked women are perverted by the Devil so they believe they ride out at night on beasts with Diana, the pagan goddess and a horde of women." That was A.D. 900.

ON THE FOURTH DAY, the Ecclesiastical Court hears the testimony of one Symonds, wheelwright, red of hair and quick of temper. Symonds for years past has sought to bed Cerridwen, and always did she stifle his lust with laughter. Now comes his revenge.

"I have heard the woman say to others of her persuasion, *May the injured Lucifer greet thee*. I have seen her at full moon trip naked and consort with things not of this world."

Consort? How, "consort"?—"In her body. Couple with Sathan in the form of a black dog, sire."

A sigh of horror mixed with satisfaction—a catharsis—overcomes those present. They cross themselves piously even as they revel in its sinfulness. Black John's "Hah!" breaks the silence that follows. Then, turning to face Cerridwen, he puts the Question:

"Art thou a witch?"

She, looking him in the eye, replies, "I am thy mother's childe, John."

What's this? A buzz of interest fills the room like the drone of a blowfly on the King's meat before it be covered with tansy.

Black John touches the crucifix that rests upon his chest. "You talk in riddles, woman. The demon within you it is that speaks. You are possessed of the Evil One."

Why yes, of course... The congregation nods its assent. Only the Prince, watching from a high place, out of sight of them all, does not nod. His grip tightens on the dagger at his waist, the knuckles white with sudden anger.

"Put her down," Black John says. "Let her see the instruments. Return her to us tomorrow, and we shall examine her body for the customary marks." With that, he sweeps out of the room, almost invisible behind his screen of armed men.

THAT NIGHT, UNDER A waning moon, three figures in the habit of the Brown Monks, their faces in the obscurity of their cowls, unlock the door and enter her cell. Without ado, two of them suppress her struggles whilst the third opens a leathern vessel, enters his hand therein, and, like unto a boy taking eggs from a plover's nest, plucks forth a small sponge. She feels the finger enter her privy parts. Her last, living experience on this plane is a spreading warmth from

her arse, from where the sponge passeth its deadly, drowsing benison into her very vitals.

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: The record is unclear at this point. The woman they called "Cerridwen" is found dead on the fifth day of her trial, her body unmarked. There is no sign of violence, no evidence of poisoning. She leaves a long, written confession in good Latin, although it seems unlikely she was literate in any language, including her own.

"THE CONFESSION IS QUITE clear, Sire," says Black John.

The Prince, whittling a cross-stave with his knife, spits.

"How do I know that? Am I a Clerk? Am I to spend my time learning letters? I script my name. That is enough. But show me the document."

The Prince touches the manuscript with his fingers as if willing the symbols to obey his will and answer to him, yet they remain inert on the page like the closed eyes of Cerridwen.

"I will read it again, Sire," Black John says.

"I, Cerridwen, natural-born daughter of Jenny Blackthorn of Crabtree Hill within the Forest of Dean in the County of Gloucester, doe declare on my dying breath and in the full knowledge I am about to face my maker the Lord God Jesus Christ, and doe confess as follows:

"This night the Angel of Death appeared unto me and called upon me to repent my life of wicked apostasy, to renounce Satan and all his works and that I did. I die a Christian.

"In my infancy a Great Ladie visited my mother and brought with her a baby she must conceal because of some great shame. The baby died of a fever and was buried eftsoons in unconsecrated ground in the deepest part of the Forest. The grave was uncovered by hogges and the body eaten by the said hogges and other carnivorous beasts. Jenny Blackthorn, fearful of the Great Ladies wrath and hoping for preferment, adopted a male child of the same age, her sister's tenth-born, her sister now being out of her wits. The Great Ladie did visit us once and was persuaded that the son of my mother's sister was in truth her own beloved infant. She sent us many a groat to keep us fed, and may she be blessed for her Christian charity.

"I was seduced by Satan when young and was his bride 'til taken by the Clerk they call "Black John." The son of my mother's sister I called "Jack," that some also say is known to be "John." I know not what was his fate after he sailed to France from the port of Gloucester with John of Salisbury, but 'twas malice and the Anti-Christ that spoke when I told to the congregation here at Hereford that we were kin, Black John the Clerk and I.

"Signed in her own blood... Cerridwen, daughter of Jenny Blackthorn. The sixth day of June 1290."

The Prince, a very Apollo, shines upon Black John and embraces him. "So ends our search for the Bastard. You did well, coz." Yet his eye, over the shoulder of his Clerk, meets the eye of Bishop Gerald and things unsaid pass between them.

"How shall we end this business, dear heart?" the Prince asks Black John. "Shall we bury the witch and have done? What says our good Bishop?"

“Sire, if she be truly a disciple of Satan, she may not be laid in consecrated earth for ’twould be blasphemy. Nor if she be a suicide, for ’twould be the only sin without release, it being the sin of despair and therefore renunciation of Our Lord’s grace.”

“Why then, Bishop, do you and your physicians and herbals examine the woman’s body forthwith for the usual blemishes, the teats, the suckling-marks, the strawberries and hirsute moles, and the rest? Now to horse! The deer run and my hounds have need of exercise and I be no Acteon for turning from hunter into hunted stag even by the sorcery of a dead Diana.”

Roaring with laughter at his own wit, he exits the castle.

Long, London, to Browne, Honolulu: Yet it is clear that something happened as a result of this woman’s death that had considerable implications for the main players in the drama. What is your theory?

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: I believe she knew too much. But who was at risk from the knowledge she concealed?

IN AN UNCONSECRATED BELL tower that stands alongside but detached from the Church of Saint Dubricius at Pembridge, beyond the spite-filled eyes of the Forest and the wagging tongues of Hereford City, they bare the corpse of Cerridwen and seek signs of the incubus... without success. The skin upon this form is so white as to be transparent—the body hairless as a childe’s. Black John, ordered to attend the hunt, is not present. Gerald, his hirsute hands and arms bare, still wears his ecclesiastical ring and Holy Cross for his soul’s sake. His eyes seek heaven but see only the oaken beams above and the bell they call Big Tom... and perched upon one of the beams, a goshawk with loose jesses about its legs, an unnatural bird that gazes contumaciously upon him with human intelligence through lambent yellow eye.

“The privy parts,” he says. His assistants, heads covered, open the legs. And turn their backs. Gerald’s fingers delve and probe as they have done many times before to uncover the signs, the guilty teats and warts but always “til this day upon a still-living body. He reflects that he must write a careful treatise concerning this matter for the scholars of the Holy See... But what is this? Inside the rear orifice, like a fledgling within the nest, a sponge which, when removed from its place of concealment, exudes an essence the herbalist knows is not Self-heal nor Saint John’s Wort but tincture of mandrake, hemlock, and poppy contained within that tiny angel of oblivion favored by midwives and called by some *the soporific sponge*. And there is something more: monkshood, that seductive blue-and-white flower shaped exactly like its sacerdotal namesake. It is a delight to behold on a fine summer’s day in the hedgerow yet, like wolfbane, the most perfect poison.

The herbalist has a sad mien, like a dog that be kicked daily or the oft-whipped Ass that Apuleius became when bewitched. His nose affrighted, the herbalist says: “Your Grace, this poor creature did not die naturally nor of her own hand, but incontinently at the hand of another. Never have I seen the sponge thus used against a mortal body. This be the Devil’s work.”

Long, London, to Browne, Honolulu: The end of Black John was equally enigmatic. One fragment attributed to John Dee quotes an earlier source,

now lost, to suggest that in this case the body was discovered in a gown that had been worn by Cerridwen and that so dressed, he was her very double.

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: This fragment I had not traced. Could it be that there are still some significant manuscripts to be found in England rather than more safely in the air-conditioned libraries of Texas? It is an interesting anecdote. We know for sure only that Dark John disappeared from the history at this point.

THE HUNT RETURNS, SPATTERED with gore but not yet sated with blood. Bishop Gerald waits at the Keep. He has a secret for the Prince's ear alone that cannot wait the morrow. The Prince's eyes darken at the disclosure. That night, they banquet on venison and nightingale, the Prince and his bosom companion Black John. Also here present are the Bishop, the hunt, the Master of Hounds, and sundry others. Last to enter is the bearded Penhebogyd, Master of the Hawks, for whom even the Prince must needs rise to welcome, by ancient custom, as he takes his place at table, the fourth in precedence. But not even Penhebogyd observes the jessed goshawk that perches patiently upon a windowsill high above the room.

The feast nears its end. The lutenists make musicke, and the Prince murmurs to Black John, "I would entertain Lady Katherine in my bedchamber this night, when the last candle be out."

Black John makes his preparations: doth paint his face like a girl's—color his lips cherry—adorn his head with a wig of rich hair that touches his shoulders—his body with sweet oils and a gown that transforms him from man to woman as if Circe herself were his wardrobe mistress. The Court well knows of Lady Katherine but speaks not of the matter. This night, for the last time, though she wit it not, she walks the long, silent gallery to the Prince's bedchamber, lifting her skirts delicately as she steps daintily over the Irish wolfhound that guards the door.

Next morning she is discovered facedown in the castle moat, still gowned, a green ribbon that was in her hair now about her neck, her eyes and tongue protuberant. The court jester capers. Others do likewise. But only he dare lampoon that Black John was privily impaled even before they removed the head for treason. "Forsooth!" he rejoices. "Treason in the head without doubt but otherwise, and elsewhere, faithful unto death, ah-hah!"

The head of Black John upon its pole faces down the rebellious West from the city walls of Hereford through a long, dry summer but no carrion molest it, for it is guarded night and day by a goshawk. The skull shrinks, desiccates, and when the wind blows it shifts and moves on its pole, and the lower jaw snaps open and shut as if to speak. Undevout, superstitious country folk say it has a secret message for them that the Prince would keep from their ears as he increases their tithes most cruelly.

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: We do know, however, that some six months after the death, the Forest of Dean rebelled.

Long, London, to Browne, Honolulu: That was a pathetic protest by a rag-tag rabble. According to Giraldus, the Prince suspected that his Clerk was

financially corrupt. So, arbitrarily, he doubled local taxes to generate the income he believed was on tap already. That was a serious mistake.

THE REBEL ARMY HAS straw for armor and a few Welsh mountain cobs for cavalry—bows and slings for skirmishing—pikes, sickles, and even scythes for the combat. The Prince laughs, his visor raised carelessly, battle-ax honed to a glittering niceness. The first head he will take is the rebel leader's. The leader is an inconsequential, moonstruck baker. The Prince spurs his horse forward, without waiting for his escort, into the narrow forest trail, where the uncommitted spectators mock him with arses exposed and turned in his way. His ax swings in his right hand and in rhythm to the canter of the horse as he closes on his opponent. The baker, riding a cob, flinches and endeavors to turn away, but he is no horseman and gives the wrong aid. His animal swings into the Prince's thundering path—rears up in fright, hurling him to the ground where he lies gasping for breath. The Prince turns back, comes in for the kill, still smiling as a pair of goshawk talons lash his face, blinding him with his own blood.

The hawk, shrieking vengeance like a banshee forewarning of death, flies off a short way, returns, and attacks again. Now its beak removes first one eye, then a second. The newly blind Prince spurs his horse, holding his seat, but crashes into an overhanging branch in his sightlessness. The peasants with their pikes finish what the bird has miraculously begun, then melt like kernes or sprites into the green gloom among mocking crickets as the Prince's men carry home the corpse of their leader.

Browne, Honolulu, to Long, London: Did the Prince die as Gerald suggests, pursued by some demon or familiar owing its allegiance to Cerridwen?

Long, London: I think not, unless you count his own folly as something that was supernaturally inspired. If that be so, we are all bewitched at some point in our lives. But dare we admit that?

