

John Collier, 'Lady Godiva' (1898, National Gallery of Art).



Lady Godiva

Susan Francino

(Coventry, England, c.1000 AD)

The countess Godiva, who was a great lover of God's mother, longing to free the town of Coventry from the oppression of a heavy toll, often with urgent prayers besought her husband . . . [and] he at last made her this answer, "Mount your horse, and ride naked, before all the people, through the market of the town, from one end to the other, and on your return you shall have your request."

Rodger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*¹

Godgivuh's neck ached. It had been aching all morning. She walked into the hall, still drowsy though it was almost noon, and found her husband lounging at the banquet table with his feet up on a bench.

"You summoned me, my lord?"

A smile played on Leofric's red-bearded face. "What are you willing to give," he said, "to lift the tax?"

She stared at him for a moment, cautious. He had never before spoken about the tax with a smile on his face.

"Anything, my lord," she said honestly. "Anything but my soul."

"Very well." He held out his hand. "Give me the rings you wear in your ears."

Godgivuh frowned. They were real pearls, but not valuable enough to pay the price of all her people's taxes. Not enough to sate avarice himself. They would hardly warm the dragon's belly.

She handed them over.

"Sit, my lady," he said, and she did.

He knelt before her, reverently it seemed, but she detected amusement in his face. "May I have my lady's fine slippers?"

"Yes . . ." She let him remove the shoes from her feet. Then he took her stockings, too, and threw them in a pile on the floor with the earrings. He kissed one of her ankles gently and stood. She sat frozen in the chair, sensing a trap.

"Now," he said, definitely smirking, "I require my lady's gown."

She stared at him, then glanced at the servant standing at the end of the hall, then looked back at him.

"Leave us," he commanded. "And shut the door." The servant bowed and left with the crisp boom of the door closing.

"Your gown," Leofric repeated, and there was no love, not even desire, in his eyes. Godgivuh's voice had a hysterical edge to it when she spoke. "Are you going to turn me out of doors? Are you going to disown me? It's not lawful. I've done nothing –"

"Shh." He pulled her out of the chair and put a gentle finger on her lips. "Never." She was far from comforted. "Then why –"

"I am setting forth terms. Do you want to hear them or not?"

"My lord," she said evenly. "I can hear terms with my gown on."

"Not these terms. Do you want to hear them?"

She felt queasy under his gaze now, but she nodded. After years of fighting over the tax, this was the first time he had brought it up on his own.

"Then, your gown." He clapped twice and held out his hands. His expression was courtly, but – now she could see it – far back in his cold grey eyes, there was cruel laughter.

She stood frozen. "I – I need –"

"What?" he said, with a hint of impatience.

"I can't take it off without a maid." It was a heavy dress, with sleeves that needed to be sewn on and a bodice that hugged her waist tightly. But she could not bear for her women to see this. It was not herself she did not want them to see, but her husband.

"Then I will be your maid," he said, and with a dagger from his belt, he carefully cut the stitches that held together the gold and red brocade. He threw the dress unceremoniously on the pile with her other things.

"Your shift," he said next, and now he grinned.

"My lord wishes to make a fool of me." Fear and fury battled inside her.

"You would make a fool of me. If that is your desire, you must trade fool for fool, and make a fool of us both. Now give me your shift."

With a shudder, she pulled it off over her head and gave it to him. It seemed more cumbersome than usual to fit it around her tightly coiled hair. But she usually had a maid.

"Your smallclothes," he said coolly. Now there was cruelty in his eyes.

She did not move.

"If you want to free your people from the tax," he said smugly, "you must do as I say."

She tried not to cry as she took them off, but the tears came anyway. She resisted the urge to cover herself, and stood tall, as dignified as she could be, though tears ran all the way down her cheeks and splashed against her bare breasts.

Her husband looked at her with not a shred of remorse. "These are my terms. Wearing naught but this," he said, gesturing at her nakedness, "ride through the town on your palfrey. From the gate to the field of lilies and back again. Then, and only then, I shall lift the tax as you desire."

She choked down a sob. Her neck ached.

His voice turned to pure bitterness. "If you would impoverish me, you must first impoverish yourself."

Godgivuh shivered. It was very cold in the hall. She lifted her heavy head to look at him. "And would you grant me leave, my lord, to do this?"

He looked taken aback for a moment, as if worried she actually would.

Then, he laughed. He threw back his head, and the laughter tore out of him, making him look mad.

"Yes," he said, his smile like acid, "I grant you leave. Choose for us. Shall we have shame or dignity? Shall we go naked or clothed? I grant you leave. If I have such a fool of a wife, then at least let it be known, that men may pity me."

Godgivuh did not know what to do. She remembered the words of a poem her tutor had read to her, which she had long kept:

Among the saints none is naked,
for they have put on glory,
nor is any clad in those leaves
or standing in shame ...²

But Leofric was not thinking of saints. He had caught sight of something near her neck. "Ah," he sneered, "the comb still glitters in your hair. You are not yet naked."

He stepped forward and grabbed her head, jarring her sore neck. She cried out in pain. He ripped out the comb and the glittering net that covered her hair, pulling many fine strands with it.

Godgivuh grabbed the stone banquet table to steady herself. How her neck ached. It felt like the weight of the world was coiled on her head.

Weeping, she said, "In the name of all that is holy —"

"What is holy?" he screamed at her, and tore the delicate net apart. Jewelled beads fell to the floor and clattered like hail.

She fled the room.

Leofric blinked in surprise as she flitted away. Not because his wife was running out of the room without clothes on. But because he thought he saw — but it must have been a trick of the light.

He looked down at the mangled golden net in his hands, then threw it on the pile of clothes and turned his back on it.

He wandered past the table and ate some bacon. He ate it all, though he was not hungry. The last piece stuck in his throat, irritating him. He coughed, and tried to sit, and abruptly got back up again.

None of the windows in the hall opened onto the town. And he was too proud — proud? — to run to a different room and watch.

So he opened a window, and stood at the pane, and listened. He could hear the normal

sounds of the town bustling about below, on the other side of the wall. Then, there was a gasp and a shout, followed by a hush.

The Earl hushed too. There was a silence in his heart – a dread – as he stared at the empty heather field and listened, as if he could see with his ears.

Then at last, there was the lone sound of horseshoes on cobbles. The noise was persistent, gentle, and sharp, like someone pounding a tiny nail into his chest.

And like an enemy hurling an insult, there stood before his mind the words that had been read in his wedding, before they had been crowned in marriage – he would never have been crowned, were it not for her: *Husbands, love your wives.*

Love your wives.

Ever after, the folk of Coventry would say that as they listened to the palfrey's hooves strike the cobbles, they also heard, like a counter-melody to the stately hoofbeat, a man weeping. They say the voice sounded far away, but he wept as if from his soul, as if struck by her beauty.

Leofric did not count the beads as he picked them up. He groveled on his knees on the cold stone floor, picking up each one and placing them in his hands. His hands were wet; they seemed to fill with tears faster than he could fill them with gems and gold.

He knew the length of her hair. He knew all of her. He had measured the length of her spine against his hands, and the softness of her breasts against his lips, and her weight against the strength of his arms. He would recognise her from nothing but her fair toes, which he had kissed each in turn.

He knew the length of her hair.

He had dragged his rough hands through it only the night before, and it was down to her waist, at most.

And that is why Leofric, Earl of Coventry, when his wife stepped back into the hall, fell on his face.

"Rise, my lord," she said above him, after a long silence.

I am not your lord, he thought miserably. Her bare feet – surely they were cold on the stone floor – paced closer to him, and her auburn hair ever so slightly swept the floor around her ankles. He recoiled as the soft curtain threatened to brush his face.

"My lord," she said again. Her hand cupped his chin. He let her raise him to his feet.

She was naked – because of him, he thought, dizzy with shame – but, in another sense, she wasn't. Her hair – how, he did not even dare contemplate – had grown so long and full that it cloaked her whole body, down to her well-turned ankles. The gods themselves had clothed her. God had clothed her. To his shame.

Her arm shifted as she fingered a piece of her hair, and he could see her through the chink. His skin flushed from the shoulders up to look on her; he was married to Aphrodite, he was married to a saint.

“Don’t look away,” she said firmly. “It will not disappear, though you look away long.”

She held out a lock of hair so long that it brushed the floor. “Touch it and see.”

“Nay, it will burn my hands,” he wrung the words from his heart, wretched.

She stood silent, waiting, looking for all the world like a Venus from Italy, or, aside from her nakedness, somehow very like a Madonna in church.

“I stripped you,” he said finally, choking on shame. “I stripped you, and sent you out of doors, and how do I find that now, you are clothed, and I am naked?”

He couldn’t bear to look her in the eyes, but he could feel that she was gazing at him.

“Do you grant me my boon?” she said.

“I grant you all.”

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Susan Francino

Notes

1. Roger of Wendover, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, trans. J.A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1844; facsimile reprint, Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1993), 314–15.
2. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 112. The author is aware that this hymn was not known in medieval England.