

The Nettle Spinner

The Nettle Spinner

Wendy Wuyts



wood wide web stories

Author: Wendy Wuyts
Cover design: Wendy Wuyts
Illustrations: Yule Hermans
ISBN: 9789465018973
© Wendy Wuyts

The short story

A rewilded retelling of a Flemish and French fairytale, collected by Charles Deulin in *Contes du roi Cambrinus* under the title “*La Fileuse d'orties*”, included by Andrew Lang in *The Red Fairy Book* (1890), retold by many women, rewilded by Wendy Wuyts, assisted by machines for translation.



Once upon a time, both in days of old and still today, Ghent was a land abundant with nettles, and home to skilled women who had an intrinsic bond with the terrain. It was their careful stewardship of the land, and their collaboration with its natural inhabitants like nettles, that propelled Ghent to prominence. While many attribute Ghent's rise in the 19th century to the advent of textile machinery,

I would argue differently. Machines, after all, are merely tools. Without the skilled hands to guide them, they are inert.

What truly set Ghent apart was its legacy: centuries prior, women had mastered the art of spinning stinging nettles. They possessed the knowledge to transform a mere plant into a magnificent rug. It could even be said that Ghent's ascendancy was due to the shamans who resided there, individuals who communed with nettles long before the city's first homes were constructed. These shamans, living in symbiosis with the nettles, aided one another, sharing their resources and expertise in both hemp and flax.

However, as time passed, the intricate skills associated with nettles diminished, and the sacred bond between the people and the land began to wane. This decline was hastened by the

arrival of men from the south, clad in unfamiliar helmets and armor, and thereafter by the peregrines from the west. They introduced new ideologies: ones that diminished the role of women, casting their ancient knowledge as the devil's work. Over the ensuing centuries, this valuable knowledge and set of skills faded into obscurity.

But not all knowledge was lost as long the nettles thrived and young girls and old ladies were willing to listen to them.

There was a time, even before the rise of textile machines, when counts held sway over Ghent, and among them, one of the most notorious was Burchard. The townspeople knew him as Burchard the Wolf. So wicked was Burchard's heart that whispers spread about him chaining his peasants to ploughs, forcing them to till the land with their bare feet, the sting of his whip urging them onward.

In stark contrast stood his wife, a beacon of kindness and compassion. Whenever she caught wind of her husband's latest cruelties, she'd discreetly right his wrongs, earning her the adoration of the people. Where he was reviled, she was revered.

On a day when Burchard was out hunting, he found himself wandering through the forest of