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“SHE IS RIGHT TO BEHAVE THUS”: IMPLICATIONS OF ILLICIT RENDEZVOUS IN  
MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

CATHERINE M. ALBERS

May 2018

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## ABSTRACT

While preconceptions of the Middle Ages often rely on assumptions about Christianity and the kind of society that the Catholic Church promoted, the reality is that the historical and literary medieval world is much more complicated. When discussing the issues of sexuality, women, and sexual normativity, these assumptions hinder our ability to accurately analyze the content and reception of medieval literature. This project addresses this gap by positioning itself among the criticism set forth by scholars of four different cultures (Irish, Norse, English, and Italian) to examine the connections between the reception of women who act outside of the boundaries of both their society and our modern expectations of medieval female sexuality.

To do this, this thesis presents a chapter on sexual nonconformity in the following texts: the Old Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the Old Norse *Laxdæla saga*, the Middle English romances *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *Amis and Amiloun*, and Giovanni Boccaccio's biography of women *De mulieribus claris*. By examining the connections between the adulterous, the bordering on polygamous, and the exceptional ingenuity of the women in each of these texts, a trend becomes clear – behaving in a way that does not conform to societal expectations of sexuality is not inherently contemptible in medieval literature. Instead, the motivations and repercussions of these characters' behavior is what ultimately leads to their positive or negative reception by both author and reader. This thesis therefore argues that sometimes women acting outside of sexual norms are a more nuanced and complex subject than has been previously assumed and signifies a broad anxiety about female sexual behavior in the Middle Ages.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all those who helped me make my Master's thesis a success: my family, my friends, and most of all my faculty advisors. This thesis was inspired by the mentoring and instruction of Dr. Lindy Brady and Dr. Valerio Cappozzo. Without them, I would have never chosen to be a medievalist, nor to engage in the texts of cultures like medieval Ireland and Italy. A million thanks and all my love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. A GODDESS COMPROMISING WITH THE PATRIARCHY: MEDB IN THE <i>BOOK OF LEINSTER'S TÁIN BÓ CÚAILGNE</i> .....	7
II. GUÐRUN AND HER PEERS: FEMALE SOCIAL AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY IN <i>LAXDÆLA SAGA</i> .....	24
III. ALL FOR SOCIAL GAIN: LOOMING NONCONFORMITY AND INFIDELITY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES.....	37
IV. BUT LET WHOEVER READS THIS BELIEVE WHAT HE LIKES”: BOCCACCIAN ANALYSIS OF ADULTEROUS AND INCESTUOUS WOMEN.....	58
CONCLUSION.....	77
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	81
VITA.....	86

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the continued growth of feminist medieval literary criticism, there are gaps in the types of feminine roles examined. Most feminist medieval scholarship focuses on the roles of women within marriages, within the household, within the family, and within religious communities. Even when discussing female desire, existing criticism tends toward the kinds of desire signaled by public courtly interactions and illicit fabliaux. A shyness prevails in the existing scholarship around women's roles in the bedroom, which is at least partially derived from medieval concepts of propriety and the lack of overt discussion within the texts themselves. Yet this should not prevent scholars from investigating such matters, and to that end, it is this gap that this thesis project addresses: the role of adultery and sexual nonconformity in claiming female sovereignty within medieval narrative. To that end, this project will be examining a breadth of women and cultures, through Irish, Old Norse, English, and Italian texts, while exploring the similarities between them and the narrative responses to the sexual nonconformity behavior of figures such as Medb of Connacht, Guðrun Ósvífrsdóttir, Belisaunt, the daughter of Carle of Carlisle, Semiramis, Faustina the Younger, and Cleopatra.

Before further addressing the texts included in this project, I would like to present a few observations of the scholarship as it currently stands. Irish, Old Norse, and Italian texts have all been respectively compared to English literature by scholars. However, these connections tend to be more interested in more conventional literary topics, such as genre, authorial intent, categorizing characters into literary types, and the evolution of pagan cultures after

Christianization. In the case of genre, these cultures have been examined by scholars such as T.F. O’Rahilly, Patricia Kelly, Nicola McDonald, Ad Putter, Jane Gilbert, Bjarni Einarsson, Elsa Filosa, and Kathryn Hume.<sup>1</sup> In general, these arguments focus on how these texts do or do not meet the requirements of their respective literary genres. In attempting to analyze the authorial intent or an authorial stance on women, scholars such as Jean E. Jost, Marilyn Migiel, Sheila Delaney, Ann Dooley, and Helga Kress present the narratorial and authorial response to the figures listed above have engaged in debates about the standing of women in their society and in literature.<sup>2</sup> While exploring the Christianization of Irish and Norse cultures, scholars such as Jenny Jochens, Arthur Gribben, and Miriam Robbins Dexter contemplate how the roles of

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<sup>1</sup> T.F. O’Rahilly, “History or Fable?” in *Early Irish History and Mythology*, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1964), 260-285; Patricia Kelly, “The Táin as Literature,” in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. J.P. Mallory, (Belfast: December Publishers, 1992), 69-102.; Nicola McDonald, introduction to *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).; Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, introduction to *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000).; Bjarni Einarsson, “On the Role of Verse in Saga-Literature,” in *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 7 (1974): 118-125.; Elsa Filosa, *Tre studi sul de mulieribus claris* (Milan: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2012).; Kathryn Hume, “*Amis and Amiloun* and the Aesthetics of Middle English Romance” in *Studies in Philology*, vol. 70, no. 1 (Jan 1973): 19-43.

<sup>2</sup> Jean E. Jost, “Hearing the Female Voice: Transgression in *Amis and Amiloun*,” in *Medieval Perspectives* 10 (1995): 116-32.; Marilyn Migiel, “Boccaccio and Women” in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, ed. Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 171-184.; Sheila Delaney, “A, A and B: Coding Same-Sex Union in *Amis and Amiloun*” in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 63-81.; Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).; Helga Kress, “‘You Will Find It All Rather Monotonous’: On Literary Traditions and the Feminine Experience in *Laxdæla Saga*,” in *The Nordic Mind: Current Trends in Scandinavian Literary Criticism* (1986): 81-92.



women changed.<sup>3</sup> However, none of these studies have yet compared these cultures while paying close attention to the matter of female sexuality and nonconforming behavior.

In her article, “Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature,” Helga Kress presents a unique feminist understanding of the conflict between men and women in the Norse sagas. She writes:

Literary history contains many statements concerning the strong women of Old Norse literature, where strength is equated with freedom. The strong women this literature depicts are not free. But they are strong, and their strength consists in resisting oppression – they refuse to be oppressed. They do not succeed, but their protest is everywhere in the text. This is what Old Norse literature is primarily about... It is a literature in which the power of the text punctures male power.<sup>4</sup>

Kress’s understanding of the text is one that this thesis holds at its foundation – that one of the primary struggles in Old Norse literature is between dominant and subordinate figures, which are women in the case of *Laxdæla saga*. However, this project assumes that this is the case for many medieval cultures’ literatures. While women are generally considered oppressed and subordinate to their male counterparts in literature, their protest is crucial to understanding their level of success in liberating themselves from this subordination. Furthermore, this indicates that the relationship between men and women within these literatures is not as definite as criticism has shown it to be.

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<sup>3</sup> Jochens, Jenny. *Women in Old Norse Society*. Ithaca, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1995.; Arthur Gribben, “The Masks of Medb in Celtic Scholarship (A Survey of the Literature Stemming from the *Tána*).” *Folklore and Mythology Studies*, vol. 10 (1986): 1-19.; Miriam Robbins Dexter, “Indo-European Reflections of Virginity and Autonomy,” *The Mankind Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1 and 2 (1985): 57-74.

<sup>4</sup> Helga Kress, “Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature,” in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 91.

In choosing the texts for this project, I have selected interesting feminine exemplars with a limited amount of scholarship on their roles within the text that counter the kinds of diametric opposition between sexes that feminist criticism has typically presented. Rather than demonstrating how women are subordinated to the patriarchal order of medieval society, Medb, Guðrun, Belisaunt, the Carle's daughter, Semiramis, Faustina, and Cleopatra each demonstrate that they are capable of resistance through one of the few avenues of sovereignty available to them: bodily sovereignty and their sexual behaviors.

In the case of Ireland and the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, there is great attention paid to Medb and her role as a quasi-divine figure. There is less attention paid to how the narrative reacts to her adultery and demands of her husband outside of these parameters. As a result, the first chapter examines how Medb's character is presented in the two earliest recensions of the text, *Book of Leinster* and *Book of the Dun Cow*, and compares her reception by male characters and the narrator. Rather than the misogynist portrait of her that some scholars have presented as the standard reading of the text, a comparison of the two recensions of the text demonstrates that Medb is encouraged in her affair, her battle performance, and her demands of her husband.

In *Laxdæla saga*, much like Medb, Guðrun Ósvífrsdóttir is frequently cited as a femme fatale character that demonstrates the dangers of a sovereign woman. The second chapter, "Complicated Lives and Complicated Readings: Marriage and Adultery in *Laxdæla saga*," addresses the roles of Guðrun as well as other women in the text. Rather than adhering to a schema of subordinate women and dominant men, the figures in *Laxdæla* complicate typical understandings of the female role in the Norse sagas. In her article "'You Will Find It All Rather Monotonous': On Literary Tradition and the Feminine Experience in *Laxdæla saga*," Kress uses Guðrun's exceptional nature to argue that *Laxdæla saga* is written by a woman to portray the

female experience. While Kress calls for an interpretation of the saga with an understanding of the feminine point of view that this chapter will be expanding on, she cannot fully explore the possibilities of such a figure in that space.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of the role of Guðrun within the story ignores the potential for a successful intervention by a woman into a masculine society, as demonstrated by the character herself. Instead, the narrative is driven by Guðrun and her actions in a way that makes her integral to the plot, while also demonstrating that patriarchal order does not need to be violently enforced when women are able to subtly move within the system and maintain their agency.

In the third chapter, I address English romance tradition and the role of women in two texts: *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. While seemingly very different texts, neither has been adequately treated by scholars who are interested in the role of women within them. Belisaunt and Lady Amiloun within *Amis and Amiloun* present very different interpretations of the expected behavior of women. While both skirt the borders of inappropriate sexual behavior, Belisaunt is rewarded for her pursuit of Amis and Lady Amiloun is condemned for her negative reaction to Amiloun's deception and murder of the steward. Their portrayal further reinforces the relationship between power, social status, and sexual relations by indicating that the outcome of their behavior is more important than the act itself. Similarly, the Carle's daughter and her parents orchestrate her arrangement with Gawain and her agreement to have sex with him outside of marriage is rewarded with social advance and praise. While their behavior is classified as sexually nonconformist, it is not treated with the disdain that is

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<sup>5</sup> Kress writes, "The traditional motifs of travel and violent disputes are indispensable in *Laxdæla* to such a degree that they often override the feminine point of view and create a conflict between the protagonist and the plot, between the feminine experience and the masculine literary tradition in which the saga is written."; Helga Kress, "'You Will Find It All Rather Monotonous': On Literary Traditions and the Feminine Experience in *Laxdæla Saga*," 183.

anticipated for sexual excursions outside of the confines of submission to marriage and patriarchal lineage.

The fourth and final chapter compares the portrayals of three women within Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* to expand outside of the confines of Northern Europe. While each woman (Semiramis, Faustina the Younger, and Cleopatra) has a very different reception and biography, each commits adultery. However, this chapter demonstrates how their reception differs based on the motivation behind their lust. In the case of Cleopatra, she is clearly condemned because her ambition and greed are the primary motivations for her lustful actions. Faustina Augusta is ultimately praised, despite her adultery, because she is reformed and deified by her husband and people after her death. Semiramis ultimately presents the most complicated portrait when she is depicted as both a wicked and intelligent woman who ruled her people well. By expanding out of Northern Europe, this chapter indicates that the complicated relationship between adultery and stigma expands across cultures of the Middle Ages.

Finally, I want to include a note about terminology within the project. I have chosen to identify the transgressive actions of these women as "sexual nonconformity" to remove the judgmental and criminal value ascribed by the commonly used phrase "sexual deviance." The loaded nature of the word "deviance" creates a moral judgment on their actions that detracts from the argument of this project. Rather than perform the judgments that this project is attempting to explore, I will simply refer to them as "nonconformists" operating outside of the typical mores of their society.

## I. A GODDESS COMPROMISING WITH THE PATRIARCHY:

### MEDB IN THE *BOOK OF LEINSTER'S TÁIN BÓ CÚAILGNE*

#### INTRODUCTION

As the longest extant version of an Irish saga, the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (*TBC*) has dominated the minds of critics of medieval Irish literature. As a result, much attention has been given to the central figure of Medb throughout the recensions of the text. Despite this, there has been little agreement reached on Medb's true nature, both within and outside of the *TBC*: whether she is divine or human, real or fictional. One of the key factors in this debate is her demonstration of her sexuality. Beginning with notable scholars such as T.F. O'Rahilly and concluding with Sarah Sheehan, the debate over Medb's character has developed into a deliberation over her status as sovereignty goddess or sexual human that has expanded to include a discussion of nuanced readings of gender roles. The problems that have become evident in this history of scholarship have brought about a call for new readings of Medb's character. In response to this call, this chapter examines the gendered and sexual aspects of Medb's development within the *Book of Leinster* and *Book of the Dun Cow* recensions of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. Ultimately, this gendered and adulterous tension indicates that she is a euhemerized sovereignty goddess, but one that is criticized at the end of the *TBC* satirically, with equality between genders, while the misogyny that would condemn her is satirized in place of the character of Medb herself.

Before outlining the moments within the text that have led to this conclusion, it is useful to point out the problems within the scholarship on Medb up to the present day. Outlining Medb's divinity has led many scholars to turn to exploring the role of a sovereignty goddess to

place her within that mold. Proinsias Mac Cana claims that it is “in her breaches of propriety that we find the clearest evidence of Medhbh’s divinity; her licentiousness is merely the literary expression of one of the characteristic functions of the Celtic goddess.”<sup>6</sup> He also argues in another book that “the conclusive mark of her characteristic role is in her very name: *Medb*, ‘the Intoxicating One’”<sup>7</sup> as “the woman’s proffering of the drink indicates not merely her acceptance but also her selection of a husband.”<sup>8</sup>

The problem for this direct interpretation of Medb as sovereignty goddess is that she is never directly shown to be such a divine figure and there are several instances within scholarship in which Medb of Connacht is conflated with Medb Lethderg of Leinster, a woman more directly linked to the sovereignty of Ireland. When discussing Medb, many scholars note that “Great indeed was the power and influence of Medhbh over the men of Ireland, for she it was who would not permit a king in Tara unless he had her for his wife.”<sup>9</sup> The necessity of wedding Medb Lethderg to hold kingship within Ireland, while it is associated with Medb of Connacht by name, does not directly translate to her interpretation as sovereignty goddess, regardless of the number of scholars who list them side by side as the same figure. In fact, Arthur Gribben has commented

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<sup>6</sup> Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1970), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Proinsias Mac Cana, “Celtic Goddesses of Sovereignty,” in *Goddesses Who Rule*, eds. Elisabeth Benard and Beverly Moon, (Cary, US: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

<sup>8</sup> Mac Cana, “Celtic Goddesses of Sovereignty,” 97. This combination with alcoholic beverages is one that has often been cited in interpretations of Medb’s name as it recalls traditions of unions of kingship with both the land and a woman that represents it.

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 120.

that these findings “appear to have been reached on the strength of one particular manuscript conceptualization.”<sup>10</sup>

To avoid such a problematic conflation of two different characters and the difficulties of combining different recensions of the text, I will only be addressing Medb of Connacht as she is presented in the two most complete recensions of the text: the *Book of Leinster* and the *Book of the Dun Cow*.<sup>11</sup> As Cecile O’Rahilly notes in her English translation of the *TBC*, the portrait of Medb within the *Book of Leinster* recension is the most complete profile of both the tale and Medb that exists. She claims that “the impression felt by the reader of [the *Book of Leinster*] is that this version is a unity, that the various elements of the tale have been brought together to form a new coherent whole by a single main ‘editor.’”<sup>12</sup> As for Medb’s character, she writes, “I believe that we have here a deliberate alteration of his exemplar by the [Leinster] redactor who wished to show Medb as the stronger character.”<sup>13</sup> However, the centering of Medb within the cattle-raid places her in a difficult position and many scholars have struggled with interpreting the end of the tale. Readers often find the conclusion to be an attempt to satirize Medb as a

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur Gribben, “The Masks of Medb in Celtic Scholarship (A Survey of the Literature Stemming from the *Tána*).” *Folklore and Mythology Studies*, vol. 10 (1986): 16.

<sup>11</sup> The *Book of Leinster* is the most complete and studied version, dated to the mid twelfth century. The *Book of the Dun Cow* is the recension that includes the adulterous tension, dated to the twelfth century, but read alongside the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, a fourteenth century fragmentary manuscript.

<sup>12</sup> Introduction to *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, ed. and trans. Cecile O’Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), liv.

<sup>13</sup> *TBC.*, liii.

female ruler and sovereignty goddess.<sup>14</sup> In opposition to this, I will follow in the tradition of Máire Herbert, who questioned the binary of misogyny and feminism within readings of Medb to analyze how her interpretation as sovereignty goddess might be read,<sup>15</sup> and Ann Dooley, who argues that the ending of the *TBC* attempts to dehumanize Medb, but fails to present her in a satiric light.<sup>16</sup>

#### GENDERED CONFLICT IN THE *BOOK OF LEINSTER'S* "PILLOW-TALK SCENE"

Within the text of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, the indications of Medb's sovereignty are first presented during "The Pillow Talk Scene." She establishes her claim over Connacht, saying that she inherited it from her father. She says that her father had six daughters and that she was chosen from among them. She declares, "I was the noblest and worthiest of them. I was the most generous of them in bounty and the bestowal of gifts. I was best of them in battle and fight and combat. I had [many men] as my standing household [...] and for that reason my father gave me one of the provinces of Ireland, namely, the province of Crúachu."<sup>17</sup> In addition to extolling her virtues, we see Medb's pride in her ability to stand without the aid of a man to rule over her. However, this moment has proved difficult for those who choose to wrestle with Medb's status

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<sup>14</sup> For interpretations of the *TBC's* conclusion as a misogynist condemnation of powerful women, see Patricia Kelly's "The *Táin* as Literature" in *Aspects of the Táin* and Kay Retzlaff's "Pretext and Context: The *Remscéla* and the *Táin*" in *Ulidia 2*.

<sup>15</sup> Máire Herbert, "Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland." *Cosmos: The Yearbook of the Traditional Cosmology Society*, vol. 7 (1991).

<sup>16</sup> Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailgne*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>17</sup> *Táin Bó Cúailgne: From the Book of Leinster*, ed. and trans. Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), 137-8.; Hereafter abbreviated as *TBC*.



as sovereignty goddess. The inheritance of land from another person, particularly a male, seems unusual for such a figure. Generally, sovereignty goddesses are directly tied to the land and do not inherit from anyone. As such, there are those who claim that it is impossible for Medb to have legally inherited Connacht from her father as a woman and claim that Ailill is correct in his assertion that it is their union which raises her status.<sup>18</sup> There are even some scholars, such as Miriam Robbins Dexter, who use legal history to discuss interpretations of Medb and Ailill's relationship and the possibility of her inheritance as being a key part of their equality. She writes that "in Ireland, if a woman had the same background and fortune as did her husband, her rights tended to be equal to his... It may well be that inheritance in Ireland was *not* solely patrilineal."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, if it is possible that she inherited from her father, this further complicates her role as sovereignty goddess. She is representative of sovereignty through her connection to the land, but she is not a goddess if she must inherit it.

This assertion that Medb cannot have historically had such a role and inherited from her father matters little when returning to the idea that she is purely fictional, but painted in a pseudo-historical light. While she may not be a sovereignty goddess herself, she is certainly an analogue to such a figure, presented within the fictional epic. Her character likely draws on the history of the name Medb or Medhbh as the name of a sovereignty goddess and relies on the linguistic interpretation of that name as part of the ritual for kingship. Where she is in some

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<sup>18</sup> For an examination of the unlikelihood within Irish legal history of female inheritance, see Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's "Ailill and Medb: A Marriage of Equals," in *Ulidia 2* and Patricia Kelly's "The Táin as Literature." For an examination of the possibility that Medb *did* inherit from her father, see Miriam Robbins Dexter's "Indo-European Reflections of Virginité and Autonomy" in *The Mankind Quarterly*.

<sup>19</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, "Indo-European Reflections of Virginité and Autonomy," *The Mankind Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1 and 2 (1985): 71.

places equated with ale, in Robbins Dexter's article, her name is associated with the word for honey. Robbins Dexter writes that her name "probably refers to a horse-ritual (confirming sovereignty) involving drunkenness due to an intoxicating honey-drink. ... In the original form of this ritual, the king mated with a mare (literally or metaphorically), who represented the goddess of sovereignty."<sup>20</sup> This linguistic connection establishes her role as an interpretation of sovereignty goddess within her name, even if she is not actually shown to be a divine being of any kind.

Medb of Connacht is surprisingly described in another work as having a supernatural lifespan. In Rosalind E. Clark's dissertation, "Goddess, Fairy Mistress, and Sovereignty: Women of the Irish Supernatural," she outlines the lovers within her life, writing, "we have seen that she is married to her fourth husband when her grand-nephew Ailill, destined to become her fifth, is still a child. She has seven sons by Ailill, and these sons are all grown warriors when she instigates the Táin. At that time her vigor is still unimpaired; it is on the Táin that she has her love affair with Fergus mac Roich."<sup>21</sup> While this is indicative of her status as sovereignty goddess elsewhere, particularly within "Cath Boinne," it is not indicative of her representation in the *TBC*. While such a representation of her would have been known to readers of the *TBC*, it is disregarded in the *Book of Leinster* recension. Fortunately, an explanation for the inheritance of her sovereignty and her humanization within this text is also provided by Clark. She explains:

This situation may be a result of the process of euhemerization. Since Medb must be represented as a human queen, she must own the land in a way acceptable to the political standards of the time. However unheard of it might be for a woman to

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<sup>20</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, "The Goddess-Turned-Heroine of the Celts: Queen Medb and the Sovereignty of Ireland," in *Goddesses in World Culture: Eastern Mediterranean and Europe*, vol. 2, edited by Patricia Monaghan, (Westport, US: Praeger, 2010), 226-7.

<sup>21</sup> Rosalind E. Clark, "The Sovereignty," in "Goddess, Fairy Mistress, and Sovereignty: Women of the Irish Supernatural," (dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1985), 175.

rule a province, it is still more probable than for that woman to be a perpetual goddess. Here we have a rationalized explanation of the way a woman came to be in such a powerful position.<sup>22</sup>

This explanation of her humanization as ruler of Connacht and the need for her to have inherited, whether historically accurate or not, shows an attempt to euhemerize a goddess whose supernatural lifespan and connection to sovereignty rituals are understood to readers of the text. Such an explanation also sheds light on several of the misogynist moments within the *TBC*. Rather than being a condescending interpretation of a sovereignty goddess, by placing Medb at the center of the story and humanizing her, she becomes a complex figure that is not satirized nearly as much as the misogynist opposition to her is.

Within “The Pillow Talk Scene,” Medb also outlines her requests for any potential husband, a quote that has often been pointed to as proof of her divinity. After describing her many suitors and her refusal of them, she explains what her bride-price was that was so extraordinary. She asks for “a husband without meanness, without jealousy, without fear.”<sup>23</sup> While this appears to have been an odd request for such a woman to make, it is not a very impractical one, nor does it seem to be that unusual to a modern reader – after all, many women would not want to marry a man who was cruel to them, frequently jealous, or a coward. What makes her request extraordinary is what follows. Her reasoning for her request is best followed requirement by requirement to break down the significance and implications of what she says.

Her first requirement is that her husband should not be mean. This is a very general request and it is not clear whether she means specifically toward herself or toward others as well. She clarifies shortly after this statement, telling Ailill that she specifically wanted a man who

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<sup>22</sup> Clark, 177

<sup>23</sup> *TBC*, 138.

was kind in respect to the culture of gift-giving which was prominent in early Irish rule. She says, “If my husband should be mean, it would not be fitting for us to be together, for I am generous in largesse and the bestowal of gifts and it would be a reproach for my husband that I should be better than he in generosity, but it would be no reproach if we were equally generous.”<sup>24</sup> Medb is very logically requesting that she and her husband be equal in their generosity toward their men. Rather than the misogynist representation that many would attribute to the *Book of Leinster*’s portrayal of Medb, this shows that she is concerned with preserving patriarchal order, even as she makes a demand as a woman. After all, she says that it would demean her husband if his wife were to be more generous than he, but if they are equal it raises their joint standing in the eyes of their people. While she refuses to be subjugated to the generosity of a man, she is also preserving the patriarchal order by requesting that her husband demonstrate a quality that is fitting for a man in his position anyway.

Her next explanation is in defense of her request for a husband that is fearless. In a society where combat and battle-prowess is crucial to one’s status as a man, this is yet another logical request. In explaining, she says, “If my husband were timorous, neither would it be fitting for us to be together, for single-handed I am victorious in battles and contests and combats, and it would be a reproach to my husband that his wife should be more courageous than he, but it is no reproach if they are equally courageous provided that they are both courageous.”<sup>25</sup> This is slightly less submissive to patriarchal ideology, which is something many of those who would claim Medb to be pure sovereignty goddess refer to. She is skilled in battle and, as is seen throughout the rest of the *TBC*, frequently takes up arms herself. They claim that she is capable

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<sup>24</sup> *TBC.*, 138.

<sup>25</sup> *TBC.*, 138.

of such greatness in battle as a direct cause of her sovereignty. Yet it seems more likely that this fact actually distinguishes her euhemerized nature and status as indirect interpretation of sovereignty goddess, especially for Rosalind Clark, who claims that if she were still directly represented as a goddess she would supernaturally affect the battle, like the Morrígan, rather than fighting in it in person.<sup>26</sup> Clark's conclusion resonates with the argument that Medb is presenting here. She wants a man who can stand at her side and fight just as well as she can, rather than stepping in to control the tide of battle herself and showing her male companion to be weaker than she. She is searching for a combative equal, not a human consort who is below her. This again reinforces her compliance with patriarchal understandings of warrior behavior.

Her final and most involved explanation is her defense of her request for a husband who lacks jealousy. This, above all the other requests she makes as her bride-price, is the one most scholars point to in proving her divine status. She says, "If the man with whom I should be were jealous, neither would it be fitting, for I was never without one lover quickly succeeding another."<sup>27</sup> Her admission of her promiscuity causes many to point to her divinity, particularly Proinsias Mac Cana, as has already been discussed in his centralization of sexual liberation within her identity.<sup>28</sup> This is, indeed, the most compelling referent to her possible divinity. However, she is still prioritizing the preservation of patriarchal values and masculinity. By requesting a man who is not threatened by others, she is requesting a man who does not need her chastity to be comfortable within his social role and masculinity. Her promiscuity must be permissible if she is any kind of interpretation of a sovereignty goddess, as her union with a man

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<sup>26</sup> Clark, 177.

<sup>27</sup> *TBC*, 138.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. note 3.

makes him worthy of kingship. By promising herself in marriage and agreeing to permanently be at Ailill's side, she is making him king, fulfilling the role of sovereignty, but she also demonstrates sovereignty over her own body. This lends strength to her character in a way that is not seen in other manifestations of the sovereignty goddess. In fact, if as Cecile O'Rahilly claims, the desire for the scribe of the *Book of Leinster* was to bring Medb's character to the forefront, her sovereignty over her own body is crucial. Anything less would seem to be a disconnect from the characteristics that she displays as commander of Connacht's forces in the remainder of the text.<sup>29</sup>

When Medb explains all of this, Ailill bristles at the possibility of being dependent on the gifts that he was given as part of his marriage contract with Medb and claims that the true reason for the union was not that he fit her requests, but that she was the best choice as his wife because of her father's position. This leads Medb to claim that her property is greater than his, regardless of her standing and the comparison of their belongings that results in the discovery of the bull that begins the *TBC*. Examining this bull is important to this study of Medb's role within the *Book of Leinster* recension of the text. The discovery of the bull is narrated as follows: "Among Ailill's cows there was a special bull. He had been a calf of one of Medb's cows, and his name was Findbennach. But he deemed it unworthy of him to be counted as a woman's property, so he went and took his place among the king's cows. It was to Medb as if she owned not a penny of possessions since she had not a bull as great as that among her kine."<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that

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<sup>29</sup> In the *Book of Leinster* recension, there is no record of the famous affair between Fergus and Medb. Instead it is "Flidais Fholtcháin, the wife of Ailill Find, who had slept with Fergus on the Táin Bó Cúailnge, and it was she who every seventh night on that hosting quenched with milk the thirst of all the men of Ireland." *TBC*, 146.

<sup>30</sup> *TBC*, 139.

the cow that Medb seeks out an equal for, and in this moment makes Ailill appear superior to her, is actually one that is a product of *her* belongings. It is her cow that gives birth to the animal and it did originally belong to her. This alludes back to her assertion that Ailill's greatness and potential for authority over her (which she has repeatedly disputed) comes from her own property and standing. As the provider of this glorious bull, she is again providing for his status. Unfortunately, Findbennach does not hold the same faith in a woman's leadership as the men who later follow Medb and Ailill to raid for the bull's equal. By leaving Medb's herd to join with Ailill's he has disgraced her and this disgrace makes her feel as if she is no longer the equal she had imagined herself to be. Rather than reading this as a vain and petty attempt to have the same material goods as her husband, this passage indicates that she has a perceived shame to overcome in this cattle-raid. When Findbennach abandoned her in favor of the rule of a man, her leadership was called into question and for an interpretation of a sovereignty goddess, such questioning is unacceptable. Medb's determination to gain a bull that *will* follow her can then be related to this betrayal by the bull that had previously been hers and undermined the status that she has just been claiming she possessed.

#### REACTIONS OF MALE HEROES TO FEMALE SOVEREIGNTY

In the course of the cattle-raid, Medb regains some of her dignity and authority by commanding the forces, even gaining recognition from Cú Chulainn. Medb becomes a particular target for Cú Chulainn's attack on the Connachtmen because of her prominence within the raid on Ulster. When he is casting stones at the invaders, he vows to strike at Medb. The text recounts his vow along with his attacks on her, saying:

Cú Chulainn vowed that wherever he saw Medb, he would cast a stone at her and it would not go far from the side of her head. It happened as he said. Where he

saw Medb to the west of the ford, he cast a stone from his sling at her and killed the pet bird on her shoulder. Medb went eastwards over the ford, and he cast another stone from his sling at her east of the ford and killed the pet marten which was on her shoulder.<sup>31</sup>

This demonstrates that Cú Chulainn has specifically focused on Medb and killing her, rather than the male leader of the armies, Ailill. He kills two of her pets in the process, narrowly missing her in his seeming assassination attempts. However, he also does not vow that he will kill her directly, allowing him to preserve his honor as he fulfills the vow he made. By focusing on her, Cú Chulainn is acknowledging Medb's superiority over Ailill, but he is not attempting to execute the leader of the forces that are attacking Ulster. Even as a boy, he demonstrates respect for his enemy and the status of the woman who is moving against him and his countrymen.

Even though the *Book of the Dun Cow* recension of the text is less complete and focuses less on Medb, it is still valuable to read alongside the *Book of Leinster* recension to analyze Medb's character, especially as it was produced over 50 years prior. In the first recension of the *TBC*, Medb's character is less villainized than in the *Book of Leinster* version of the text, despite being less central. Despite her more peripheral status, her character reinforces the equality that I have just presented. Even as Ailill is assessing the forces and deciding who they should take with them forward, he asks Medb if she is "belittling their men" when she tells him that they should not take the Gaili6in. She responds, "I am not belittling them [...] They are splendid warriors. [...] It is useless for them to go on this expedition [...] for it is they who will take the credit for the victory of the army"<sup>32</sup> and then suggests that they kill them instead, because she doesn't want them to stay behind and take their land. Fergus then claims that this is foolish advice from a

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<sup>31</sup> *TBC.*, 173.

<sup>32</sup> *Recension 1*, 129.



woman. Yet these two men still felt that they had to ask her opinion before making a choice about the forces that would go with them to Ulster. While they ultimately dismiss her idea, she is still a crucial part of the decision-making process on this cattle-raid.

In the *Book of the Dun Cow*, the struggle between Medb's sovereign identity and her sexual identity is solidified in her affair. Medb is unfaithful to Ailill while on the cattle-raid, sleeping with Fergus. This is yet another moment when her sovereignty is referred to as an excuse for her promiscuity. However, it is only part of the reclaiming of bodily sovereignty and equality that defines Medb's conflicts with her husband. In this recension of the text, even her infidelity with Fergus is excused by Ailill. When Ailill is told of her relations with Fergus, he simply says, "She is right (to behave thus) [...] She did it to help in the cattle-driving."<sup>33</sup> Rather than being angry at his wife and behaving in the jealous way the reader would expect, he behaves as Medb's bride-price requires and acknowledges that she could be sleeping with Fergus to gain his loyalty.<sup>34</sup> The competition between them that follows is then more likely about dominance than true jealousy. If she is to be read as a quasi-sovereign figure, Ailill must remain better than Fergus to retain control of his forces. As for Medb, she defends herself, saying, "Cease these uncouth speeches. A noble lady is not the secret love of a stranger ... I am not given to destruction and unjust judgments."<sup>35</sup> Through this assertion, she is informing the men and the reader that the decision to have sex with Ailill or Fergus is hers alone to make. However, she is justifying her reason, rather than trying to wrest control over her body from her husband. This is

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<sup>33</sup> *TBC.*, 155.

<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that Medb's bride-price is being transferred here from the *Book of Leinster* recension, as the "Pillow Talk Scene" is not included in the *Book of the Dun Cow*.

<sup>35</sup> *TBC.*, 155.

not an attack on the men, as much as it is a reminder that she is not below either of them, even if she is not above them.

The conclusion of the *Book of Leinster* version of the *TBC* provides another moment to discuss the importance of Medb's character and role within the text. She once again suffered humiliation at the hands of a man when "her issue of blood came upon [her]."<sup>36</sup> She asks Fergus to cover the retreat while she relieves herself, but he is not successful and Cú Chulainn discovers her as she is vulnerable. The *Book of Leinster* recension recounts, "Cú Chulainn came upon her thus engaged but he did not wound her for he used not to strike her from behind. 'Grant me a favour today, Cú Chulainn,' said Medb. 'What favour do you ask?' said Cú Chulainn. 'That this army may be under your protection and safeguard till they have gone westwards past Áth Mór.'"<sup>37</sup> Again, Cú Chulainn shows respect for Medb when he does not attack her in this compromised position. While this is also likely related to his own honor (in that he does not attack a woman while she is vulnerable), the fact that he agrees to grant her request is surprising. She has just been defeated and humiliated in his discovery of her act, yet Cú Chulainn grants her the dignity of his protection for her forces. This is not the misogyny that many would argue is frequently demonstrated in the conclusion of the text. Instead, Cú Chulainn, who is still a boy within this tale, is showing his respect for the powerful woman before him, not even ridiculing her compromising position. Menstruation is, of course, uniquely feminine and her discovery at that moment reminds Cú Chulainn of her gender, but she is treated no differently from any of the men he gives respect to. As a hero followed throughout the tale, it is surprising that he does not demonstrate the attitude so many would attribute to this text.

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<sup>36</sup> *TBC.*, 269.

<sup>37</sup> *TBC.*, 270.

Rather than Cú Chulainn, the man who does appear to demonstrate misogyny, and is often cited as such, is Fergus, one of Medb and Ailill's supporters. In their final exchange, the text says: "'This day was indeed a fitting one (for those who were) led by a woman,' said Fergus ... said Medb to Fergus. 'This host has been plundered and despoiled today. As when a mare goes before her band of foals into unknown territory, with none to lead or counsel them, so this host has perished today.'"<sup>38</sup> The interpretation of his assertion that the defeat of the army is the appropriate end for a force led by a woman as a misogynist one is hard to dispute. In Medb's embarrassment, her forces are "despoiled," which is a very feminized image of the defeat of the army that harks back to her own feminized disgrace. As Patricia Kelly reads this quotation, "Medb is ... being assessed here with respect to sovereignty: she is found wanting, and it is her sex which disqualifies her."<sup>39</sup> Yet in a tradition of literature in which sovereignty is directly related to women and femininity, it is impossible for being a woman to disqualify Medb from the role of sovereign figure.

Ann Dooley offers evidence that this portion of the text may do just the opposite. According to her, mares often leads herds in Indo-European history of domesticated horses and "they cannot seriously be made to represent a world upside down no matter how much men try."<sup>40</sup> Such a fact would hardly have been uncommon knowledge during the transmission of the *TBC* into its various recensions. Medb's foregrounding within the *Book of Leinster* in partnership

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<sup>38</sup> *TBC.*, 270. The text here is damaged and does not tell us what Medb's reply to Ailill is, making interpretation of their exchange difficult.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Kelly, "The Táin as Literature," in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. J.P. Mallory, (Belfast: December Publishers, 1992), 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 182.

with this false accusation of misguidance leads to a different reading than that of many scholars: those who criticize Medb because of her gender are ignoring her role as euhemerized sovereignty goddess and the authority she has possessed throughout the rest of the tale. Her response to this accusation, to lead everyone to watch the bull fight, shows that she is unfazed by Fergus's criticism and leads to her final return to equality with her husband.

### BATTLE OF THE BULLS (AND SEXES)

Finally, the text concludes this gendered struggle with the portion of the text that many scholars believe to be the oldest: the fight between the bulls of Ailill and Medb. This scene of violence echoes the attitudes in the rest of the *TBC*. In the beginning of the conflict, Ailill's bull and Medb's bull "began to gore and to pierce and to slay and slaughter the other."<sup>41</sup> Then, Findbennach plunged his horn into the side of the Donn Cúailnge and it appears that he will emerge dominant. Yet after the bulls raged around Ireland, the Donn Cúailnge returned and distributed parts of Findbennach across the land, attacking the land and people until "his heart broke like a nut in his breast."<sup>42</sup> These events have often made readings of the *TBC* complicated and disjointed. However, the analogues between Ailill and Medb are clear. They began the *TBC* by tearing at each other's status and Ailill gains mastery over Medb, through his possession of the bull. Yet after they make the raid across Ireland, Medb emerges victorious, with the bull that equals Ailill's in her possession. In the rest of the bulls' actions there are implications for the euhemerized sovereignty figure. Attacking and destroying the supporter of patriarchy drives the Donn Cúailnge mad and leads to the destruction of the land. If Medb is a sovereignty goddess,

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<sup>41</sup> *TBC*, 271.

<sup>42</sup> *TBC.*, 272.

this is a very real potential consequence for her attack on Ailill's status. Medb had previously retained her own sovereignty and dignity through compromise with the patriarchy, understanding that she and her husband must be equal if he is not ruling over her. The madness of the Donn Cúailnge comes with the destruction Medb could seek of her husband, though it would contradict her nature as sovereignty figure. In fact, the Donn Cúailnge's victory leads to the destruction of the women and children of its province, removing signs of fertility. The fact that this ultimately breaks the bull's heart speaks to Medb's role as protector of her people and her land. Surpassing Ailill is not an option as it would lead to her madness and her failure as sovereignty, but being his equal is. With both bulls dead, neither is left to be supreme over the other and peace returns.

If the conclusion that she is made unequal by the desertion of Findbennach in the beginning of the tale is accepted, the death of both bulls brings Medb back into equal standing with Ailill. After all, the bull deserted her because of the same claim that Fergus has made that she is unfit to lead because she is a woman. Yet, she has successfully gotten safe passage for her men, even as her body is shamed by Cú Chulainn's interruption of her menstruation. She overcomes the expected feminine embarrassment to obtain protection for her people, even after Fergus has failed to protect her. In the end, she has claimed a bull that is equal to her husband's and they have fought, ending in death, proving that neither was truly stronger than the other. After this, not only do Medb and Ailill have the same possessions, but the bull who betrayed her because of her femininity is destroyed by the bull she was able to claim despite her gender and her complacency with equality is explained. To be less than equals does not fit her character, but to be equal means that she is a more effective ruler and sovereignty figure, even as she is no longer a divinity.

## II. GUÐRUN AND HER PEERS: FEMALE SOCIAL AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY IN *LAXDÆLA SAGA*

### INTRODUCTION

As shown by the previous chapter, the relationship between men, women, marriage, and adultery is complicated, particularly in Christianized pagan cultures. There is no exception in the Old Norse literary tradition. The protagonist of *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrun, is one such example. In the saga, dated to the thirteenth century, she demonstrates that she operates outside of the proposed schema of confined and restricted women by using tactics (including violence, alliance, and deceit) scholars such as Helga Kress attribute to male domination of powerful and unruly women.<sup>43</sup> Alternatively, there are scholars such as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir who argue that “Women appropriating and performing male roles ... transcend the boundaries between gender roles usually depicted as fixed and natural in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and when read against the grain, they open up the provocative suggestion, and perhaps express the female fantasy, that male roles can be filled with members of either sex.”<sup>44</sup> While there are only a few figures who threaten violence directly, there are several who more subtly deviate from their expected roles and affect the world around them, despite the limitations of being a woman and it is this nuanced understanding of women that this chapter will be pursuing. With the help of her

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<sup>43</sup> Helga Kress, “Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature,” in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 91.

<sup>44</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 11.

own motivation and her sex appeal, Guðrun can advance her goals and social status. While this does not mean that Guðrun has the same standing and power as a man, it does mean that she is not nearly as incapable as many understandings of medieval society would imply. Furthermore, she echoes the autonomy, both social and sexual that are present in Medb's story.

### GUÐRUN THE WOMAN

Guðrun is the wife of four different men and the lover of a few others. Like most female medieval characters, her beauty and her bloodline are emphasized. As Jenny Jochens points out in her book *Women in Old Norse Society*, the impetus for marriage in pagan Iceland was primarily the political and financial contracts marriages could create. She writes, "As the number of unfree people declined, this distinction [between free and unfree] lost importance, particularly in Iceland, but it was replaced by differences in wealth and prestige. Only individuals who were 'an equal match' (*jafnræði*) could marry."<sup>45</sup> By emphasizing her bloodline and worthiness, Guðrun is made eligible for marriage in the eyes of her society. In *Laxdæla saga*, she is introduced and described as "the most beautiful woman ever to have grown up in Iceland, and no less clever than she was good-looking."<sup>46</sup> Her beauty is one of the features that is repeatedly referred to in the text and is often considered to be part of her worth when men are contemplating marrying her. Each husband chooses her because she is the worthiest of all the women they know. Even Kjartan, who ultimately is not her husband, but her husband's killer, knows that she is "both clever and good with words" and his father says that he is uneasy with his son's feelings,

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<sup>45</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>46</sup> "The Saga of the People of Laxardal" in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Keneva Kunz, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), 327.

but “it isn’t because I don’t appreciate how much superior to other women Guðrun is, as she is the only woman I consider a worthy match for you.”<sup>47</sup> Her value in a traditional, marriageable sense is frequently stated and underlies the immense respect that all the men in the saga have for her. They repeatedly discuss her superiority to other women, as well as their own desire to marry her because of this superiority, placing Guðrun in a mold of expected female behavior. Even when she behaves with cruelty toward another woman who has married the man she loved or avenging the death of her husband, she is justified.

However, Guðrun is more than a marriageable woman – she is a powerful figure in the political landscape of Iceland. She uses the attraction between her and the men around her to get the men she wants, the financial arrangements she wants, and vengeance for her third husband without risking the life of the man she wants to marry. This agency contradicts the subjugation of women that Kress points to in her argument for female subordination and conforms more to the argument presented by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir in *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*. She argues that when assessing the roles of women in the sagas “the picture that emerges is not a simple dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ or ‘independent’ and ‘powerless’ women, and it allows for ambiguity and subversion in itself by arguing for the monstrous Other as a category representing human qualities that are repressed and abjected but can never be made to disappear.”<sup>48</sup> While this chapter will not be tackling the monstrous Other, the utility of such a complex reading is essential to the portrait of Guðrun presented here. She is not a part of this category, simply because she continues to function within the confines of her society. However, she does use the kinds of ambiguity and subversion to create her own, unique place.

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<sup>47</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 344.

<sup>48</sup> Friðriksdóttir, 1.



While Guðrun never picks up a weapon as a shield-maiden to achieve her goals, which would be a more direct usurpation of the male role, she does use alliances and deception. When she wants Thorgils to avenge the murder of her husband, he sets the conditions that she must agree to marry him after the vengeance is complete. In order to do this, she and Snorri the Goði come up with a plan to trick him into killing Helgi without a marriage. The saga says:

Thorgils spoke: ‘It makes no difference to me whether his name is Helgi or anything else. I don’t feel it beyond me to take on Helgi or any other man. I’ve said my last word on it; you promise before witnesses to marry me if I manage to help your sons get their revenge.’ Guðrun replied that she would keep any promise she gave, though it were made before but a few witnesses, and said they should agree on this bargain.<sup>49</sup>

Though she has not explicitly given what he has asked for, the potential for a marriage to her is enough to make him agree to fight any opponent. She ultimately decides to use the contractual loophole to marry another man, despite her promise to him. However, she has used the opportunity to change the political landscape and eliminate one of her enemies without subjecting herself to yet another marriage she doesn’t want. This is not simply the representation of a female protagonist, nor does it fit in with the patriarchal domination of women that Kress points to in both of her articles. Instead, it shows how a woman can use the avenues available to her to affect change that would typically be outside of her purview, but also use the violence and deceit that Kress attributes to male dominance over women. While it is possible to argue that women fulfilling such a role is a trope of the literature, Guðrun is more than that. There are several instances where she and the women who come before her employ these expectations of feminine behavior as a way of having control within the system. This may be because Kress is correct in arguing that the saga was written by a woman as a way of showing women’s struggle

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<sup>49</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 389.

within the literature of the time, but the authorship of the text does not invalidate the employment and expansion of tropes to show a powerful female figure present in *Laxdæla saga*.

While she may not use these tools as easily or as directly as men do, she does use her sexuality as a supplement to them. She is unhappy with her first husband, Thorvald, and is attracted to their friend Thorð Ingunnarson. The saga says, “Thorð Ingunnarson made a point of befriending Thorvald and Guðrun and spent a great deal of time at their farm, until soon rumours of the growing affection between Thorð and Guðrun spread.”<sup>50</sup> While there is no explicit mention of adultery, Thorð is the one who comes up with the plan to get Guðrun out of her marriage after Thorvald slaps her. When they are successful, they secure a divorce for Thorð as well, “Thorð rode west to Saurbaer with a party of eleven men to claim his share of the property, which was accomplished without difficulty since Thorð was prepared to be generous about his wife’s share. He drove a large herd of livestock back to Laugar and proceeded to ask for Guðrun’s hand in marriage.”<sup>51</sup> While their relationship is not indicated to be physical before their marriage, it is clearly skirting the edges of adultery while they are both still married. However, she uses Thorð’s desire for her and her own passion for him to get herself out of her unhappy marriage. This is consistent throughout the rest of her life, especially in the deception already discussed. While it is an indirect way of altering the world around them that may not be frequently used by the dominant group, it is uniquely available to women such as Guðrun.

Guðrun’s use of violence and weapons is much less direct than her use of the other tools that Kress argues are available to men in Norse sagas. While this may seem as if it is simply her playing into misogynist interpretations of the female instigator, it also is indicative of her attempt

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<sup>50</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 332.

<sup>51</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 334.

to seize the form of control that is most available to her. She is acutely aware of the expected role of women and accuses her brothers of being better at fulfilling it than she is. She tells them:

With your temperament you'd have made some farmer a good group of daughters, fit to do no one any good or any harm. After all the abuse and shame Kjartan has heaped upon you, you don't let it disturb your sleep while he goes riding by under your very noses, with only one other man to accompany him. Such men have no better memory than a pig... The lot of you just sit here at home, making much of yourselves, and one could only wish there were fewer of you.<sup>52</sup>

By calling her brothers the equivalent of a group of daughters and chastising them for their inaction, she is indicating that she is better equipped in temperament to fulfill the masculine role than they are. She ridicules them and urges them to violence so that they perform the vengeance that is expected of them. As a result, the text tells the reader: “At Guðrun’s urging Bolli’s resentment of Kjartan and his offences grew, and he quickly gathered up his weapons. They were nine in number: Osvif’s five sons, Ospak, Helgi, Vandrad, Torrad and Thorolf, Bolli was the sixth, the seventh was Gudlaug, Osvif’s nephew and a promising young man. Odd and Stein, the sons of Thorhalla Chatterbox, completed the party.”<sup>53</sup> By acknowledging the expectations of men and women and pressuring the men around her into believing that their role is about to be reversed, she is affecting change in the political landscape and seizing control that Kress’s argument would rightly say is typically denied her. Like Medb to Ailill in “The Pillow Talk Scene,” Guðrun is a formidable woman in a position of power and seizes control of the men around her by reminding them of their expected roles as well.

#### GUÐRUN’S PREDECESSORS

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<sup>52</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 369.

<sup>53</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 369-70.

The status of Guðrun and her function within the patriarchal and dynamic society presented within the sagas is inextricably connected to the other female figures that appear alongside her. Before Guðrun is born, the women who appear are less directly oppositional to her than later figures, but still warrant discussion. The saga opens with the story of Unn the Deep-minded, daughter of Ketil Flat-nose and ancestor of Guðrun. After the death of her father and her son, Unn is aware of the political and social turmoil she is placed in.<sup>54</sup> In response, she takes control of her fate, builds a secret ship, and sails away with all the men who are still alive to accompany her. The saga says:

She had a knorr built secretly in the forest. When it was finished, she made the ship ready and set out with substantial wealth. She took along all her kinsmen who were still alive, and people say it is hard to find another example of a woman managing to escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers. It shows what an exceptional woman Unn was.<sup>55</sup>

Lacking the expected male component of her society, Unn steps in to maintain stability for herself and her followers. Her clever escape is indicative of the potential for strong female characters to lead their people successfully and wisely. In addition, she sets up fruitful marriages after her escape so that generations are impacted by her wise counsel. She successfully uses political arrangement, clever behavior, and control of wealth to save her people and create a precedent of women in power within the saga that Guðrun can follow in. Her quick thinking and deception saves her people and maintains her dignity.

The conflict between Jorunn and Melkorka also foreshadows Guðrun's behavior and her conflict with other women in the saga. While Jorunn and Melkorka are more physically violent

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<sup>54</sup> Specifically, it is noted that “her future prospects there were rather dim.” “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 278.

<sup>55</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 278.

than Guðrun, they demonstrate the conflicts between women that Guðrun more subtly embodies later in the text. Both women are the mothers of Hoskuld's children, though Melkorka had previously been a slave. After Melkorka reveals her identity as an Irish princess, Jorunn becomes uncomfortable with her proximity to Hoskuld and treats her poorly. The saga says:

Jorunn treated the slave-woman no better than before, but Hoskuld was rather more kindly towards her from then on. Shortly afterwards, when Jorunn was getting ready for bed, Melkorka assisted her in removing her socks and shoes and laid them on the floor. Jorunn picked up the socks and struck her with them. Angered, Melkorka gave Jorunn a blow on the nose, causing it to bleed, before Hoskuld came in and separated them. After that he had Melkorka move to another farm farther up the valley.<sup>56</sup>

The struggle between them is more than simple jealousy. With the revelation of Melkorka's social status, Jorunn is threatened by the woman who has borne her husband a suitable child. The use of physical violence is one that is attributed to men by Kress, but these women engage in it when their status is threatened. While Guðrun does not use this kind of violence, she does follow in the footsteps of women such as these. The conflict between two women foreshadows the struggles Guðrun will have with other female characters and demonstrates one path that is available to her. However, it is a risky path. If she is deemed to be in the wrong like Melkorka, she will lose her status and honor. Instead, she chooses to play on the expected manipulative behaviors of women to get what she wants.

#### FROM SEXUAL SOVEREIGNTY TO POLITICAL CONTROL: GUÐRUN'S RIVALS

Each woman who appears after these is Guðrun's rival in one way or another and their interactions can reveal more about the position of women in literary society. Auð is the first woman to come into contact with Guðrun in the narrative. While Guðrun is still married to her

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<sup>56</sup> "The Saga of the People of Laxardal", 290.

first husband, Auð is married to Guðrun's second husband and lover. Auð has no noted faults, but Guðrun is often described as the best of women. Because Auð is the only thing standing between Guðrun and her lover Thorð after Guðrun's divorce from her first husband, Thorvald. Utilizing the strict gender roles that her society has placed upon her and other women, Guðrun finds a way to get Thorð out of his marriage, described in the saga:

Guðrun asked Thorð 'whether the rumour is true, that your wife Auð is often dressed in breeches, with a codpiece and long leggings?' He replied that he had not noticed. 'You can't pay her much attention, in that case,' said Guðrun, if you haven't noticed such a thing, or what other reason is there then for her being called Breeches-Auð?' ... 'What is more important is how long the name will follow her.'<sup>57</sup>

Guðrun is very aware of the strict codes around dress and uses the possibility that a woman might deviate from these ascribed gender roles to secure her goals. After she mentions this to Thorð, it plants a seed of doubt in his mind and he agrees that he should divorce his wife if she is rumored to dress like a man. While Guðrun never directly encounters Auð, she alters the course of her life. This confrontation is about status and getting the desired male counterpart, much like with Melkorka and Jorunn. However, Guðrun chooses a less violent alternative to Jorunn, while still maintaining her superiority over Auð, even though she is the second woman to appear in Thorð's life. Auð, however, picks up a weapon to strike against her husband Thorð and seriously wounds him.<sup>58</sup> These are two different approaches to female control and agency in a society that has clearly pitted them against each other with similar roles and abilities.

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<sup>57</sup> "The Saga of the People of Laxardal", 333.

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of Auð and other skalds, see Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Ambiguously Gendered; The Skalds Jorunn, Auðr, and Steinunn" in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature*, *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 261-71.

The second woman to come up against Guðrun is Hrefna, who is married to Kjartan. She is much the opposite of Guðrun, showing herself to be submissive in ways that Guðrun is not comfortable with. When Kjartan and Hrefna meet, she tries on the head dress that was originally designed as a wedding gift for Guðrun. When Kjartan sees it on her and knows that Guðrun is already married to his foster-brother, he says “to my mind the head-dress suits you very well, Hrefna. I expect the best thing for me would be to own both the head-dress and the comely head it rests upon.”<sup>59</sup> Hrefna does not seem pleased with this assumption, possibly because he is clearly indifferent to owning any woman who isn’t Guðrun, and says, “People would expect you to take your time choosing a wife, and get the wife you choose.”<sup>60</sup> He assures her that it doesn’t matter to him which woman is his wife and departs. When they meet again, Kjartan speaks with her for a full day and Kjartan “was very pleased and said that, as far as he could tell, she was the fines of women in all respects.”<sup>61</sup> Hrefna leaves the ultimate decision up to her father, removing her own agency in the situation, despite her earlier seeming indignation about Kjartan’s indifference to her.

When Guðrun and Hrefna finally meet each other, it is after Guðrun has been forced into acknowledging her lesser role in the new order of Kjartan’s house. She overhears Kjartan saying that Hrefna will have the seat of honor and does not immediately confront him, but later goes to Hrefna and says that she thinks that she should display the head-dress at the feast. Again, she is thwarted by Kjartan. Ultimately, Hrefna allows Guðrun to see the head-dress. The saga says, “Guðrun unwound the head-dress and looked at it awhile, without either praising or criticizing it,

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<sup>59</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 358.

<sup>60</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 358.

<sup>61</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 359.

until Hrefna took it and put it away.”<sup>62</sup> It is after Guðrun is finally able to see the head-dress and has such a strange reaction to it that the head-dress is stolen. As it was originally designed for Guðrun, her jealousy makes her Kjartan’s first suspect in its disappearance. When he confronts her, she says, “[E]ven if it were true someone here was involved in the disappearance of the head-dress, in my opinion they’ve done nothing but take what rightfully belonged to them... I won’t shed any tears if the result is that Hrefna will have little ornament from the head-dress from now on.”<sup>63</sup> The enmity between Guðrun and Hrefna is clearly laid out in this statement, as well as Guðrun’s guilt, even if she doesn’t admit to it directly. She removes the direct indication of Hrefna’s superiority and usurpation of her role from Hrefna’s possession and is bold enough to implicate herself. Her animosity toward the clearly more passive Hrefna never fades and even after Kjartan is killed, Guðrun says, “last but most important, to my mind, is the thought that Hrefna won’t go to bed with a smile on her face this evening.”<sup>64</sup> Much like Melkorka and Jorunn, the animosity between women over a man demonstrates the influence that men have over their lives. However, Guðrun takes it upon herself to make up for the slights done to her by Hrefna and Kjartan.

Other scholars have pointed to magic as an indicator of feminine power within Norse sagas. In Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir’s article, “Women’s Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*,” she writes that women primarily use magic as a means for social, financial, and reputational gain. Furthermore, she explains, “The chief strategy for women to exert influence in the private sphere is by persuading the men closest to them to do their will,

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<sup>62</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 363.

<sup>63</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 365.

<sup>64</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 372.



goaded them into exacting revenge or giving them carefully selected pieces of advice. However, when there are no husbands or male relatives who could act on their behalf, magic is the primary tool available to women to maintain their family's honor."<sup>65</sup> While Guðrun does not herself use magic, we do see her engaging in these other methods for wresting control from those around her. However, early in the saga, she has prophetic dreams that indicate what shape her life will take. These prophetic dreams give Guðrun this trope of flexibility through magic usage that Friðriksdóttir is discussing in her article. One of the earliest scenes with Guðrun in it sets up Guðrun's unique nature in the rest of the saga when these prophetic dreams were interpreted. After recounting her dreams to her father's friend Gest Oddleifsson, Guðrun is told the trajectory her romantic life will take. This is described:

“You will have four husbands; I expect that the first man to whom you are married will not be a match to your liking... And since you removed the head-dress and threw it into the water, this means that you will leave him... [Y]ou will be married to a second, fine man for whom you will care greatly and enjoy only a short time. It would not surprise me if he were drowned... [Your third husband] will not surpass his predecessor to the same extent that you felt that metal to be rarer and more precious... When the ring appeared to break in two, in part because of your own carelessness, and blood to seep from its parts, this signifies that this husband will be killed... [The helmet] signifies that you will marry a fourth time and this husband will far surpass you.”<sup>66</sup>

While Guðrun does not particularly like the prophetic interpretation of her dreams that is offered to her, she accepts it and decides to think on it if it proves true. These dreams that are interpreted for her give her a measure of control over the path that her life will take. She is aware of what will happen to each of her husbands and can choose her actions accordingly. While this incident is never specifically mentioned in the later portions of the saga, it looms large in the reader's

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<sup>65</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, “Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*,” *Scandinavian Studies* vol 81, no. 4 (2009): 427.

<sup>66</sup> “The Saga of the People of Laxardal,” 330.

mind and draws on the tropes available. Even as Guðrun behaves in the more stereotypical female roles and fights with the other women around her, she has been given a measure of autonomy because of her magical foreknowledge.

## CONCLUSION

While Kress's claim about the possibilities available to men and women initially seems to be prescriptive in a way that ignores some of the evidence, an examination of the roles of women in *Laxdaela saga* indicates that by-and-large her analysis rings true. However, the characters of Guðrun, Auð, Jorunn, Melkorka, and Unn demonstrate that there are a variety of paths available to women in the sagas because of Guðrun's exceptional nature as a protagonist. Auð, Jorunn, and Melkorka use the violent methods of control that Kress stresses are available only to men and are successful in doing so. What makes Guðrun unique, and like her predecessor Unn, is that she is successful not only in the expected feminine way, but also in her utilization of hybrid techniques of control. While other women use violence, she instigates it in a more feminine way, with magical foreknowledge to foreshadow the outcome, expanding upon the tropes of female control in Norse literature. As a result, she controls the text and presents a character that challenges any attempt to describe the sagas with a uniform formula. As such, this chapter has attempted to supplement Kress's readings of the sagas and engage with these difficult characters in a way that has revealed them to be interconnected and conscious of literary tropes, while also attempting to work outside of them. This trend of expansion outside of the expected feminine sexual role to advance socially and politically is also exhibited by English women in the next chapter.

### III. ALL FOR SOCIAL GAIN:

#### LOOMING NONCONFORMITY AND INFIDELITY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES

##### INTRODUCTION

The majority of readings of Middle English romances like *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* that focus on questions of sexuality tend toward readings of the male characters and their queer relationships.<sup>67</sup> However, in this chapter I would like to explore some of the previously neglected relationships between female characters and their sexuality. While these texts have been treated by scholars, they are also underrepresented in the body of scholarly research on Middle English romance.<sup>68</sup> As a result, this chapter is dedicated to a discussion of women claiming their sexuality and the potential polygamy that accompanies it. The unexpected result of these sexual tensions is an acceptance of (dominant) female sexuality, a subversion of expected gender roles, and the creation of a social contract that unites couples for the betterment of their own standing and their society. Though the Middle English romances do

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<sup>67</sup> For an interesting treatment of the relationship between the men in *Amis and Amiloun*, see Tison Pugh's chapter "From Boys to Men to Hermaphrodites to Eunuchs: Queer Formations of Romance Masculinity and the Hagiographic Death Drive in *Amis and Amiloun*" in *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature*.

<sup>68</sup> The lack of scholarship on *Amis and Amiloun* is noted by Kathryn Hume in her 1973 article "*Amis and Amiloun* and the Aesthetics of Middle English Romance" in *Studies in Philology*, vol. 70, no. 1. Despite her intervention and analysis of the text within the tradition of romance, there is still not much scholarship on the female relationships. In "Hearing the Female Voice: Transgression in *Amis and Amiloun*" Jean E. Jost discusses the social transgressions of Belisaunt and Lady Amiloun, but does not spend much time on their sexual nonconformity. *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* has been analyzed even less thoroughly.

not support adultery or polygamous tension in the same manner as the *Táin*, they still explore how these nonconformist tensions can result in a unique and happy conclusion for all parties involved, while pushing the boundaries of conventional sociopolitical contracts and behaviors.

#### THREATS OF POLYGAMY AND CLAIMED SEXUALITY IN *AMIS AND AMILOUN*

The women in *Amis and Amiloun* show that women claiming their sexuality can be a positive thing, even within the constrictive confines of male relationships. Belisaunt demonstrates that female characters can take charge of their sexuality to their own benefit, while Lady Amiloun demonstrates that female characters in command of their sexuality can be read in a complex way – she is virtuous in her ideals, but condemned for disagreeing with her husband. Moreover, these women are more than just stand-ins in male relationships, but also highlight the borders of polygamy that exist on the fringe of their stories. This complex reaction to sexually secure women is best analyzed by a discussion of their motivations for behaving outside of societal norms.

The first instance of nonconformist sexuality in *Amis and Amiloun* is demonstrated when Belisaunt uses premarital sex as a way to secure the stability of her own future. As the daughter of the duke, she is entitled to a good husband.<sup>69</sup> However, it is unclear if she will have any say in who her husband will be and by using her sex appeal to her advantage, Belisaunt is gaining some agency in her future marriage arrangement. In the historical example of one of the Paston

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<sup>69</sup> It is unclear whether the text is part of the tradition of thought that indicates that a woman's status is determined by her husband. It is literary in nature and, therefore, does not necessarily have to be grounded in real practices, but this is a trend that extends across works and is part of Amis's plea to Belisaunt and is therefore included as context for the romance. For an analysis of a slightly later and real family's approach to marriage of daughters, see Laura Watson's "The Disposal of Paston Daughters" in *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Medieval English Literature*, edited by Muriel Whitaker. New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1995.

daughters, Laura Watson notes “Her role in her own marriage negotiations was to be the passive recipient of offers and to fall in willingly with her parents’ plans”<sup>70</sup> and that “it was especially important that the marriages of young women improve or, at the very least, maintain the family’s social standing.”<sup>71</sup> Belisaunt, however, is not content with calmly and passively accepting her role in such an important life choice. After her father holds a feast, Belisaunt begins taking control of her own future and asks each of her maids which man they thought was the best knight. The narrator describes the exchange:

That mirie maide gon aske anon  
Of her maidens everichon  
And seyde, ‘So god you spede,  
Who was hold the doughtiest knight  
And semlyest in ich a sight  
And worthliest in wede,  
And who was the fairest man  
That was yholden in lond than,  
And doughtiest of dede?’<sup>72</sup>

The reasoning for her inquiry is embedded within the question itself. She wants to know which of the men presented to her is the worthiest husband. By asking this, she is preparing herself for marriage to whichever man she deems best, even before she knows who he is. In essence, she is doing her research and finding out which man most appeals to her maids in order to pursue him herself, as we see later in the romance. This does not directly depict Belisaunt claiming her own

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<sup>70</sup> Laura Watson, “The Disposal of Paston Daughters” in *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Medieval English Literature*, edited by Muriel Whitaker (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1995), 51.

<sup>71</sup> Watson, 47.

<sup>72</sup> “Amis and Amiloun,” in *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, ed. Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 22, ll. 448-456.

desires, but shows the social and economic motivations for her actions in the coming scenes, in which she is responsible for all sexual advances.

After listening to her ladies and determining that Amis is the best of the knights presented to her, she falls in love with him.<sup>73</sup> When she is finally able to approach him, while her father is away on the hunt, she professes her love, initiating the romance between them. The encounter is described:

And when thai were togider alon,  
To Sir Amis sche made hir mon  
And seyd opon hir play,  
"Sir knight, on the mine hert is brought,  
The to love is al mi thought  
Bothe bi night and day;  
That bot thou wolt mi leman be,  
Ywis, min hert breketh a thre,  
No lenger libben y no may.<sup>74</sup>

Rather than a man taking charge of the love affair, *Amis and Amiloun* gives the female lover that power. This, in and of itself, is unusual in the typical structure of a romance. The agency in the relationship has been stripped from Amis, giving Belisaunt all the authority and sovereignty in the relationship. Not only does she gain sovereignty in the relationship, but she also gains sovereignty over her own body and the use of her sexuality. In doing so, Amis is then placed in an uncomfortable position – he cannot reject Belisaunt without going against the code of courtly behavior, but his oath to his lord, her father, means that to accept her is also inappropriate.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Belisaunt also falls into illness without his returned affection. Her illness grounds the story within the genre of Middle English romance and lovers who fall ill when they cannot consummate their love. This is genre specific evidence of their love.

<sup>74</sup> "Amis and Amiloun," 25-6, ll. 568-576.

<sup>75</sup> This is a position not unlike the one Lady Bertilak places Gawain in in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The contradictions between the role of the chivalric knight, the role of the lover, and the role of the subservient man mean that when the woman is pursuing the man

While she does not directly state her intent to ultimately marry Amis, she does imply it in the oath she asks him for. Her request mimics the language of the holy sacrament of marriage, even without an explicit name. She says:

Plight me thi trewthe thou schalt be trewe  
And chaunge me for no newe  
That in this world is born,  
And y plight the mi treuthe also,  
Til God and deth dele ous ato,  
Y schal never be forsworn.<sup>76</sup>

She asks him for an exchange of vows and “trewthe,” which indicates a pledge of fidelity. This is not abnormal in the courtly tradition, but she also says that they will not part until death and invokes the name of God in the pledge as well. By asking this, she is equating her proposed orchard pledge to a precursor of a marriage bond. After her discussion with her maids about which knight would make the best husband, her request for a holy pledge of loyalty until death is indicative of her ultimate goal in seducing Amis – she is looking for a husband and is using her sex appeal to secure one. She is asking him to submit to her control of their relationship in a form of personal bodily sovereignty that is unusual in romances. Belisaunt is the aggressor and Amis is her prey.

Amis tries to decline her offer anyway, referencing her status above him as a reason that they cannot be together. The discrepancy in their social status is the most convenient explanation for his reluctance to become her lover: it allows him to reject her without insulting her honor, her beauty, or her dignity. As discussed above, the status of a woman often was tied to that of her husband, rather than her own status lifting her husband higher than his original station. Amis

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without the lord’s permission, the pursued man has no convenient way to fulfill all the expected roles and contractual obligations.

<sup>76</sup> “Amis and Amiloun,” 26, ll. 583-588.

attempts to dissuade her by using the system of power to remind her that this will not maintain the status quo of power dynamics and to discourage a woman from being put in a further position of power over a man. As a result, he is much more interested in reminding her of the social discrepancy than in discouraging her attentions for any emotional reason. He says:

Madame, for Him that dyed on Rode,  
Astow art comen of gentil blode  
And hir of this lond schal be,  
Bithenke the of thi michel honour;  
Kinges sones and emperor  
Nar non to gode to the;  
Certes, than were it michel unright,  
Thi love to lain opon a knight  
That nath noither lond no fe.<sup>77</sup>

He begins his plea for her to forget him with a plea to remember her lineage for the sake of God. Amis reminds her that he doesn't have the kind of property or status that she does and that their social discrepancy is too wide for their romance to be worthy of her station. As yet another familiar trope of courtly love, this is not enough to discourage Belisaunt. The impossible union and the distance between social classes makes their tryst all the more appealing to the reader of the Middle English romance. He doesn't reject her for lack of love or interest and so she continues to pursue him.

When he doesn't show her that he has no interest in her, the way that Belisaunt pursues Amis is even more forceful than before. She even begins to threaten him with accusations of assault, when she says:

“Ac,” sche seyde, “bi Him that ous wrought,  
Al thi precheing helpeth nought,  
No stonde thou never so long.  
Bot yif thou wilt graunt me mi thought,  
Mi love schal be ful dere about  
With pines hard and strong;

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<sup>77</sup> “Amis and Amiloun,” 26, ll. 592-600.



Mi kerchief and mi clothes anon  
Y schal torende doun ichon  
And say with michel wrong,  
With strengthe thou hast me todrawe;  
Ytake thou schalt be thurch londes lawe  
And dempt heighe to hong!”<sup>78</sup>

She invokes the name of God again, contrary to the terrible nature of her threat, while also echoing his own appeal that she remember her own station of birth and her superiority to him. Belisaunt swears on God’s creation of them that his plea won’t help him in rejecting her. Instead, she says that if he does not agree to her wishes, her love for him will have been paid for in his pains and suffering because she will punish him with dishonorable accusations and eventual hanging. By placing Amis in this situation, she is forcing him into submitting to her desires. If he chooses to give in to her request, he loses authority in the relationship. If he chooses to resist her and she accuses him of rape, he loses authority in the court. He cannot choose to reject her without risking his own life and safety and she has full control over her own future. Furthermore, the statutes for punishment of rapists at the time of the first known manuscript of *Amis and Amiloun*, the Auchinleck Manuscript, indicate that he should have “judgement of life and of member.”<sup>79</sup> This indicates that if he chooses to sleep with her and she gives him her virginity, then he is obligated by his code of honor to marry her or pay a severe penalty. Her control is nonconformist in a society where the dominant religion preaches that women should be in a role

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<sup>78</sup> “Amis and Amiloun,” 27, ll. 625-636.

<sup>79</sup> Original Text: “jugement de vie e de member.” In *The Statutes of the Realm* 2.376-368, 12 vols. (London 1810-1828; repr, 1963) as quoted in Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Statutes of Rapes and Alleged Ravishers of Wives: A Context for the Charges Against Thomas Malory, Knight” in *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 28 (1997): 369. This statute is set forth in 1475 in *The Statutes of the Realm*. While this is outside of the realm of the romance, it is indicative of attitudes toward rape at the time.

of sexual submission, even in the few situations where sex is permitted (i.e., in the case of marital consummation or procreation). Belisaunt's request is outside of these two situations and is, therefore, outside of the parameters of permissible sexual encounters.

After weighing his two options, both of which likely lead to death, Amis decides to give in to Belisaunt's wishes, reluctantly choosing a path of sexual encounter over one of honor and truth after a delay of seven days. Before they parted, "He graunted hir will tho, / And plight hem trewthes bothe to, / And seththen kist tho tuai."<sup>80</sup> This promise of physical love delights Belisaunt and Amis leaves her to greet the men returning from the hunt. Like Belisaunt, they have been successful in capturing their prey. Their success parallels Belisaunt's persuasion of Amis in yet another successful reversal of the roles of courtly lovers. Indeed, after her success, it is her joy in her conquest that the text focuses on. The poet writes:

Thus, ywis, that miri may  
Ete in halle with game and play  
Wele four days other five,  
That ever when sche Sir Amis say,  
Al hir care was went oway,  
Wele was hir o live.  
Wher that he sat or stode,  
Sche beheld opon that frely fode,  
No stint sche for no strive.<sup>81</sup>

While the men around her celebrate the success of their hunt, Belisaunt continues to pursue Amis, expanding her initial success. While she has engaged him, and convinced him to submit to her, she has not gotten the final thrill of the ultimate conquest yet. She is happy in the promise of her success, but is not yet living it.

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<sup>80</sup> "Amis and Amiloun," 28, ll. 667-669.

<sup>81</sup> "Amis and Amiloun," 29-30, ll. 709-717.

Even as she is overjoyed in the potential for her conquest, the poem presents language of hunting and combat. Her huntress behavior is then observed by the steward, who suspects that there is more than is strictly appropriate between Lady Belisaunt and Sir Amis:

On sir Amis, that knight hendy,  
Ever more sche cast hi eyghe,  
For no thing wold sche spare.  
The steward ful of felonie, ...  
Bi her sight he perceived tho  
That gret love was bituix hem to.<sup>82</sup>

As far as Amis is concerned, of course, there is no such love – only threat and intimidation, despite the difference in their standing. Belisaunt is the lustful pursuer and he is her prey, but that does not stop the steward from reading her emotions in the situation as love. He does not seem to question if she could have been swayed in her feelings by some sort of impropriety on the part of Amis. If her seizing control of the situation were not already going against the expectations of the reader, the immediate assumption that Amis was the initial pursuer makes this clear. Her agency is removed by this assumption and shows an attempt to return the relationship between them to a more normalized version of sexual encounter. For the reader, it shows that her behavior is slightly unusual, especially since the steward assumes a mutuality on the part of Amis. Her beauty and reputation seem to mean that there is little doubt Sir Amis would be interested in her – rather, the problem is how he managed to seduce her into being interested in him. The ultimate death of the steward and his inability to prevail in combat against Amiloun (disguised as Amis) render this interpretation of events impossible. Even though the text does not directly subvert the dominant male interpretation of the situation in the events, it does indicate that the assumption of domination is invalid.

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<sup>82</sup> “Amis and Amiloun,” 29, ll. 697-704.

Despite his continued hesitancy, it is Amis that finally makes the first physical move.

After more prodding from Belisaunt, Amis holds up his end of their bargain. The poet says:

That hende knight bethought him than  
And in his armes he hir nam  
And kist that miri may;  
And so thai plaid in word and dede,  
That he wan hir maidenhead,  
Er that sche went oway.<sup>83</sup>

In this moment, the poet reverses the action so that Belisaunt is the one who is conquered, rather than the knight Sir Amis. In doing so, he shows the man taking away control of the liaison from the female, especially as he “wan hir maidenhead.” This is particularly reminiscent of the language of conquest and in the final moments before their romantic tryst, not only does Amis win her virginity, but he wins control of their romantic involvement. Rather than allowing her to continue in this position of control, she is made more passive in the action and the typical order is returned. However, it is significant that Belisaunt was the initiator of the romance and won a promise from Amis that forced him to choose between his honor as a servant of the duke and his honor as a man of his word. His courtesy wins out and he stays true to his own promises. So, while the language indicates that he has taken control, he has only done so after she has forced him into a position to do so. His control is minimal in comparison to her engineering of the situation.

When Amiloun defeats the steward under the guise of Amis, he is given Belisaunt to marry, regardless of the social differences that Amis had provided as an obstacle to their relationship. This renders Amis’ previous objections moot and enables Belisaunt to reach the

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<sup>83</sup> “Amis and Amiloun,” 31, ll. 763-768.

goal she had given in her initial question to her ladies. Furthermore, it restores the normal order that Belisaunt's desire for Amis had reversed. Her father says:

Bifor this lordinges everichon  
Y graunt the ful yare,  
For Belisent, that miri may,  
Thou hast bought hir ful dere today  
With grimli woundes sare;  
Therefore y graunt the now here  
Mi lond and mi douhter dere,  
To hald for ever mare.<sup>84</sup>

The duke has no problem giving his daughter over in marriage to the man he believes in Amis, despite Amis's previous hesitance. In fact, if it were not for Belisaunt's pressure, she might never have wed him at all, particularly because his advancement as a result is abnormal. Amis's reluctance to engage with Belisaunt is never fully explained. Instead, his fears and reasoning are rendered false and irrelevant by Amiloun's defeat of the steward. The initiation of the romance between Amis and Belisaunt by the woman, despite the protestations of the man, is resolved in the favor of the woman.

It is at this point that the threat of bigamy and polygamy becomes overt in the story. Amis is at Amiloun's home with Lady Amiloun and Amiloun is at the court with the promise of marriage to Amis' lover, Belisaunt. While Amiloun never intends to marry Belisaunt in the place of Amis, the threat of bigamy and adultery is present within the text. While it is dealt with through the loyalty of the two friends, it lurks as a border threat to the happiness of the couples. While they are deceiving the court to clear Amis' name, the two men are placing themselves in dangerous, potentially bigamous, territory. The tension between the men and the women

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<sup>84</sup> "Amis and Amiloun," xx, ll. 1385-92.

highlights how disastrous their deception could be, but also shows Belisaunt's superiority to another woman.

Belisaunt's foil is housed within the figure of Lady Amiloun. Despite her husband's honesty with her and her chastity when she could have slept with another man, the wife of Amiloun is portrayed as wicked. When she is reintroduced to the tale after the wedding of Amis and Belisaunt, she is described:

So wicked and schrewed was his wiif,  
Sche brac his hert withouten kniif,  
With words harde and kene,  
And seyde to him, "Thou wreche chaitif,  
With wrong the steward les his liif,  
And that is on the sene."<sup>85</sup>

Her integrity, though such behavior is typically considered a virtue, is turned against her here, simply because she condemns her husband for his actions. By disagreeing with him, she breaks his heart. He has killed a man who was innocent of the charges against him through deceit and manipulation. While she is described as "wicked and schrewed," she is also on the virtuous side of this argument. As a punishment for his actions, Sir Amiloun is afflicted with leprosy by God. Lady Amiloun is chastising him for his sinful behavior, which God later punishes, but is somehow painted as the villainous one. In fact, her death is one of the last problems within the poem to be resolved. In a poem of 2509 lines, her downfall and death is thirty of the last fifty lines.

However, she also remains true to her lord before this, despite the coldness Amis is showing her, because she thinks that he is her husband and is unwell. When he continues to place a sword between them, saying that he does not want to touch her, she is upset, but does not push

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<sup>85</sup> "Amis and Amiloun," 53, ll. 1561-1566.

the matter. He avoids the threat of adultery that is present in Lady Amiloun's advances, but she pursues him unknowingly. Her lack of knowledge, while it makes her behavior understandable, is still a threat to the relationship between Amis and Amiloun. Rather than engage in an overt polyamorous relationship, Amis chooses his loyalty to Amiloun over the potential for a sexual affair with Lady Amiloun. The narrator describes the scene:

The levedi thought in hir resound,  
It hadde ben hir lord, Sir Amiloun,  
That hadde ben sike that tide;  
Therefore sche held hir stille tho  
And wold speke words no mo,  
Bot thought his wille to abide.<sup>86</sup>

She is doing her wifely duty and obeying the will of her husband, despite the cruelty that he exhibits when he says that he doesn't want to touch her for any reason. This emphasizes the difference in expectations for women within the tale itself. While Lady Amiloun is preserving her relationship and fidelity to her husband, she is condemned for her lust for him. She is positioned as a contrast to Belisaunt, who doesn't focus on preserving her virginity, but rather on using her body to further her own goals. Her cleverness in satisfying her lust is praised with a happy ending, while Lady Amiloun is punished for her condemnation of her husband's deception. By tying both into a threat of bigamy, the text puts Belisaunt and Lady Amiloun in dialogue with each other and with their respective knights. As a result, the threat of unknowing adultery positions the obedient sexual woman below the sexually nonconformist when Lady Amiloun is condemned for her disapproval of their actions, while Belisaunt is given a happy ending for her successful and deceitful conquest.

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<sup>86</sup> "Amis and Amiloun," 43, ll. 1183-1188.

Boundaries of Adultery and Familial Polygamy in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*

In the National Library of Wales, the understudied medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, presents a late fifteenth century example of the dangers of illicit rendezvous.<sup>87</sup> In the romance, Arthur's famed knight Gawain visits the house of the Carle of Carlisle and takes part in a feast there. During this time, he demonstrates that he is attracted to the Carle's wife, watching her intently as she goes about her hostess duties. When the Carle notices Gawain's interest, he allows him to kiss his wife and then lures the knight into having sex with his daughter, substituting the maiden for her mother just before sex. Ultimately, this results in the marriage of the Carle's daughter to the knight and they return to Arthur's court as a happy couple. While it is not explicit that the marriage (along with his daughter's raised station in the Arthurian court) has been the Carle's plan all along, the ending and his conscious manipulation of Gawain's desires indicates it is a likely possibility.

Within this text, two women share the role of huntress and prey in a gambit to secure a marriage for the younger of the two. Such a plan is in line with the kind of autonomy in making marital matches already exhibited by Belisaunt in *Amis and Amiloun*, as well as by Medb and Findabair in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The family in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* cleverly uses this ploy to secure an advantageous match for the daughter. When he arrives after a hunt at the feast of the Carle, Gawain is initially interested in the wife of the Carle of Carlisle. The poet describes the scene, writing:

So moche his love was on her lyght,  
Of all the soper he ne myght  
Nodyr drynke nor ette.  
The Carle sayde, "Gawen, comfort the,  
For synn ys swete, and that I se.

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<sup>87</sup> Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 93.



Serten, I the hete,  
Sche ys myn thou woldyst wer thynn.  
Leve seche thoghttus and drenke the wynne,  
For her thou schalt nott geytt.”  
Syr Gawen was aschemmyde in his thowght.  
The Carllus doughtter forthe was brought.<sup>88</sup>

The substitution of the daughter for the wife is begun by the Carle of Carlisle himself. Gawain is entirely smitten with the Carle’s wife, but rather than permit the impropriety of lust for a married woman, the Carle reminds Gawain that she belongs to him and brings his daughter forward instead. However, the transfer of romantic attachment is crucial to the outcome of the romance. Repeatedly, the Carle entices Gawain with his wife and then facilitates the transfer of affections to his daughter. Both women are complicit in the Carle’s plan to marry his daughter to Gawain, even if it isn’t described as such.

After Gawain and the other knights have been fed and are content, the men accompanying Gawain are led off to bed and the plan to lure Gawain into romantic encounter with the daughter of the Carle of Carlisle can begin. He is taken to the Carle’s chamber and laid on his sheets of gold. After he is comfortably situated in the bed, the Carle sends in his wife, who had earlier gotten Gawain’s attention. By acknowledging the adulterous tension, the family and the poet are turning his desires to their own purposes. The passage indicates how such tension can be used to narrative and political advantage:

When the bede was made wytt wynn,  
The Carle bade his oun Lady go in,  
That lovfesom was of syghte.  
A squyer came wytt a prevey far  
And he unarmyde Gawen ther;  
Schaply he was undyght.  
The Carle seyde, “Syr Gawene,

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<sup>88</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 96, ll. 406-416.

Go take my wyfe in thi armus tweyne  
And kys her in my syghte”<sup>89</sup>

As these lines tell, after the lady of Carlisle enters the bedchamber, Gawain is disrobed and told to kiss her. This act, in and of itself, is not necessarily improper, depending on the nature of the kiss.<sup>90</sup> Gawain’s previous desire for the lady seems not to illicit any objection and he agrees to embrace and kiss the Lady of Carlisle, ignoring the dangerous nature of engaging in potentially adulterous and tempting embraces with his host’s wife.

There are limits to the hospitality of the Carle and his Lady, however. It is when those limits are reached that the threat of familial polygamy is clear in the text. When Gawain begins to push the limits of propriety by seeking more than a kiss from the lady, the Carle stops him and sends his daughter to take the place of his wife in the remainder of the exchange. Though he has just been intimately involved with her mother, the Carle tells his daughter than she may take her place in the final consummation of the would-be adulterous act. The poet writes:

When Gawen wolde have doun the prevey far,  
Then seyde the Carle, “Whoo ther!  
That game I the forbede.  
But, Gawen, sethe thou hast do my byddyng,  
Som kyndnis I most schewe the in anny thinge,  
As ferforthe as I maye.  
Thow schalt have wonn to so bryght  
Schall play wytt the all this nyghte  
Tyll tomorrowe daye.”  
To his doughtter chambur he went full ryght,  
And bade her aryse and go to the knyght,  
And wern hyme nott to playe.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 97, ll. 448-456.

<sup>90</sup> In fact, in the tradition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a kiss with the permission of the husband is completely acceptable – as long as the act goes no further

<sup>91</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle in Carlisle,” 98, ll. 466-477.

Despite the Carle stopping Gawain from pushing further with his wife, he is perfectly willing to substitute in his daughter. However, the Carle rewards Gawain's obedience to him in this exchange. With the Carle's permission, sex with the daughter of the Carle is within the confines of Gawain's moral code. He can have the physical consummation of the romance without any of the impropriety that an illicit affair with the Lady of Carlisle would require. It also leaves the encounter with the possibility of a satisfying ending for the reader – in the wedding of Gawain and the daughter of Carlisle. This match would be advantageous for the Carle, whose standing is lower than that of Gawain's, and provides Gawain a sexual reward for his obedience and chivalry. The daughter is beautiful and holds the promise of becoming like her mother. While it seems as if the Carle and his wife are manipulating Gawain into a position to marry their daughter, it is not until Gawain commits the sexual act that the legal union becomes necessary. Until then, it is merely a temptation that he can overcome.

The daughter of the Carle of Carlisle is reluctant to go and join Gawain, despite her father's commands. However, once she arrives, the daughter is happy with arrangement and the young man that her father has matched her with.

Sche dorst not agenst his byddyngge doun,  
But to Gawen sche cam full sone  
And style doun be hyme laye.  
“Now, Gawen,” quod the Carle, “holst the well payde?”  
“Ye, for Gode, lorde,” he sayde,  
“Ryght well as I myghte!”<sup>92</sup>

Though it lacks the language and ceremony of marriage, their consummation of the relationship marks their bond. The conversation between the Carle and Gawain is reminiscent of a business transaction between the two men, much as a marriage would be. The conversation also reminds

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<sup>92</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 98, ll. 478-483.

the reader of the father's blessing of the union and a religious blessing as well, with the invocation of the Virgin Mary before the maiden physically consummates the business transaction between her father and Gawain.

“Nowe,” quod the Carle, “I woll to chambur go;  
My blessynge I geyfe yow bouthe to,  
And play togedor all this nyght.”  
A glad man was Syr Gawen  
Sertenly, as I yowe sayne,  
Of this Lady bryght.  
Serten, sothely for to say,  
So, I hope, was that feyr maye  
Of that genttyll knyght.  
“Mary, mercy,” thought that Lady bryghte,  
“Her come never suche a knyght  
Of all that her hathe benne.”<sup>93</sup>

In the language of blessing, the impropriety and sinfulness of their behavior is dismissed. By invoking Mary, the maiden demonstrates her own connection to Catholic spirituality, but gives no indication that her behavior is problematic. The fact that Gawain is the best knight to have come to her father's court makes their union politically, socially, and financially advantageous for her. Her beauty makes their union advantageous for them. There has been no discussion of a sacred and official marriage, but Gawain surely understood the ramifications of his actions. By agreeing to sex, both parties are organizing the foundation for an advantageous union for both. His quality as a potential husband is what wins over the young maiden as she prepares to lose her virginity to the handsome Gawain.

The language of ceremony reappears the morning after the tryst between Gawain and the daughter of the Carle. “To a Mass they let knelle; / Syr Gawen arose and went thertyll / And kyst

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<sup>93</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 98-9, ll. 484-495.

that Lady bryght and cler.”<sup>94</sup> By going to the Church and kissing the young lady that he has just spent the night with, Gawain is performing a kind of reverse wedding ritual. The joy of the future bride and bridegroom is described at the feast that the Carle has prepared for his visitors before they depart. In fact, “Syr Gawen and this Lady clere, / They were iservyd bothe ifere. / Myche myrthe was theme bytwene; / Therefore the Carle was full glade.”<sup>95</sup> Without her virginity, the young maiden has been promoted to a Lady and is seated beside the man who has claimed her as if she were his wife. There has been no formal declaration of such a relationship, but all the social behaviors make this interpretation possible.

Even before the lady is married to Gawain, the relationship between them is clear, though it reverses the order of ceremony and consummation. The speaker narrates:

“He gaf Syr Gawen, sothe to say,  
His doughter, and a whighte palfray,  
A somer ichargid wyth golde.  
Sche was so glorious and so gay  
I kowde not rekyn her aray,  
So bryghte was non on molde...  
Then thei rode syngynge away  
Wyth this Yonge Lady on her palfray,  
That was so fayre and bryghte.”<sup>96</sup>

In his departure, Gawain has claimed the daughter of the Carle, not only in the physical sense, but in the social and economic sense as well. She is part of his companions and property now and travels with him to the court of Arthur. Without the official ceremony, she has come to fulfill the social position of his wife. With such a performance of their union in the eyes of the court and the physical performance of the union within the bedchamber that preceded it, all that remains is

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<sup>94</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 99, ll. 505-507.

<sup>95</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 100, ll. 553-556.

<sup>96</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 101, ll. 565-579.

for Gawain and the lady to be wedded legally, which occurs at the end of the poem. After Arthur makes her father a Knight of the Round Table, the narrator says: “On the morne when hit was daylight / Syr Gawen weddyid that Lady bryght, / That seemly was to se.”<sup>97</sup> This is the culmination of the union between Gawain and the daughter of the Carle and completes the reverse process of marriage that she initiated with their physical union.

Most of this process, while seemingly engineered by the Carle, requires an agency on the part of the daughter. Though she lacks a name, which many scholars would argue strips her of her autonomy within the text, she has the choice to obey or disobey her father in the consummation of her relationship with Gawain. Ultimately, she decides that he is a worthy husband and initiates the process that allows her to marry the knight and to improve her father’s station in doing so. She falls in love with the knight and uses her body to entice him without ever tricking him into thinking that their union would be an unholy one – he knows all along that it will end in marriage and he continues anyway. The two are finally happy and in love when their marriage is legally finalized and her ploy for a husband above her in social and economic status is successful. In doing this, she has claimed control over her own status and life in a way that is uniquely feminine. Her father helps her along the way, but this kind of agency is only truly available to women of her status – hers is the choice and the action that allows all of them to advance.

## CONCLUSION

What both romances indicate is that the Late Middle English tradition is not so far divorced from that of the earlier Irish polygamy that this project began with. Instead, it shows how sexuality and desire can be manipulated successfully and acceptably to further the

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<sup>97</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle,” 103, ll. 634-6.

development of society and for political gain. In both cases, illicit relationships threaten the normal order of Arthurian courtly code. In *Amis and Amiloun*, the lovers cause the threats of wife-swapping, adultery, and female dominance in romantic relationships. In *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, the family orchestrates a new romance through threats of adultery, polygamy within a blood family, and female sovereignty. While the expectation may have been that women were forced into passive acceptance of their roles when choosing a future husband, these texts indicate that, at least in the literary world, that was not always so. As a result, these women are given a strength and control over their own fates that makes them endearing to the reader and allows the romantic tension to resolve itself in a marriage that is beneficial to everyone.

#### IV. “BUT LET WHOEVER READS THIS BELIEVE AS HE LIKES”:

#### BOCCACCIAN ANALYSIS OF ADULTEROUS AND INCESTUOUS WOMEN

#### INTRODUCTION

Though not geographically as close as Iceland, Ireland, and England, the Italian literary tradition has been shown to connect closely with late Medieval literature. The relationship between Giovanni Boccaccio and iconic Middle English writers like Chaucer has been adequately proven by many scholars.<sup>98</sup> However, it is clear that the connection between these literatures is more than derivative. The depictions of adulterous women demonstrate a trend in medieval societies and cultures to feel anxiety over sexually nonconformist women and to struggle with what their nonconformity means for their society and interpersonal relationships. While there is no direct lineage between the sources discussed thus far and *De mulieribus claris*, the case study that follows will demonstrate how the previously described trend of thinking about adulterous women expanded beyond the North Atlantic and into continental Europe down to the Mediterranean.

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<sup>98</sup> From the earliest and most foundational works to the present, some treatment of this topic includes: Peter Borghesi, *Boccaccio and Chaucer* (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1903); N.R. Havely, *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tale* (Woodbridge, Engl: D.S. Brewer, 1980); N.S. Thompson, *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996); Thomas J. Farrell, “Source or Hard Analogue? ‘Decameron X, 10’ and ‘the Clerk’s Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 37, no. 4 (2003); George Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson* (South Bend: U of Notre Dame P, 2011).



Giovanni Boccaccio is the most understudied of the late medieval Italian triumvirate – comprised of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio— yet his work *De mulieribus claris* provides a unique insight into the writer’s understanding of women and their role within society. Within this text, he compiles the biographies of 106 women (in 104 stories), detailing their accomplishments and their shortcomings at length. He also analyzes their influence on those around them and the motivations for the continuance of their legacy.<sup>99</sup> As such, it is a useful tool for understanding the interpretation of adulterous women in fourteenth century Italy.

Scholars have debated if Boccaccio can be labeled as misogynist or philogynist for decades.<sup>100</sup> Marilyn Migiel sums up this debate well, writing:

Regina Psaki has asserted that it is unlikely that “we will ever be able to locate Boccaccio definitely at any point on a spectrum from philogyny to misogyny; for Psaki, Boccaccio is not “simply pro- or anti-feminist,” but rather, “he places the rhetorical moves of each stance in dynamic opposition with the other, to destabilize and problematize familiar claims.” ... Jason Houston has stated categorically that trying to the Boccaccio’s down to one authorial stance on gender is missing the point.<sup>101</sup>

This chapter echoes these authors’ point that, like in my reading of the *Táin*’s depiction of Medb, the interpretations of these women and the narrator’s response to them is more complicated than

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<sup>99</sup> Elsa Filosa has included a very useful guide to the women, their nationalities or roles, reception by Boccaccio, and the reason for their fame in a table within her book. It should be noted that while it was helpful in my interpretation of the biographies presented within the text, there are a few differences in our readings of Boccaccio’s response; Elsa Filosa, *Tre studi sul de mulieribus claris* (Milan: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2012), 184-7.

<sup>100</sup> For studies of gender in Boccaccio’s masterpiece, *Decameron*, see: F. Regina Psaki, “Voicing Gender in the Decameron” in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, ed. Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015); Marilyn Migiel, “Boccaccio and Women” in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, ed. Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015); and Laura Di Sisto, “Boccaccio, Friend or Foe? An Examination of the Role of Women in the *Decameron*” in *Spunti e ricerche* 10 (1995).

<sup>101</sup> Migiel, 171.

can be expressed through such a binary. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Boccaccian narrators are unreliable. Migiel also notes, “Boccaccio has his narrator repeatedly foreground his judicious handling of sources, but he also has his narrator draw attention to the sometimes wilful process that he uses to arrive at conclusions.”<sup>102</sup> By comparing Boccaccio’s depiction of women such as Semiramis, Cleopatra, and Faustina Augusta, it becomes clear that adultery itself is not the deciding factor in his judgment of a woman’s legacy, even for the narrator of the collection. In fact, it is the other aspects of their behavior that more heavily influence his portrayal of their lives, especially the effect it has on their relationships with their families and their social contribution.

#### FAUSTINA AUGUSTA

Faustina Augusta was a Roman woman who committed adultery against her husband with several other men. In discussing her biography, Boccaccio’s narrator (henceforth called Boccaccio, unless otherwise specified as the author) first presents an introduction, then presents her virtues, and continues to describe her adultery at length. After a relatively lengthy discussion of her husband’s punishment options and decisions, her story is concluded with her death and legacy as a divine woman. Of the two pages of text, almost a full page is devoted to the story of her adultery. It is again worth returning to Migiel noting that Boccaccio the author’s desire to point out his narrator’s evaluation process “becomes especially evident when the narrator moves from dispassionate narration of conflicting views, to mild approbation of a single view, to wholesome embrace of that single view.”<sup>103</sup> This is particularly useful when analyzing his

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<sup>102</sup> Migiel, 182.

<sup>103</sup> Migiel, 182.

interpretation of Faustina Augusta, because while her adultery is clearly the most important aspect of her biography, Boccaccio dismisses it and paints a generally positive depiction of the Roman empress.

Faustina Augusta is introduced as someone who “acquired more glory in life and death through her husband’s kindness than through her own deeds.”<sup>104</sup> While this removes some of the credit for her good deeds from the woman herself, he does not subsequently ignore her virtues. Instead, he proceeds by explaining how this understanding of her character came to be. When he finally turns his attention to her adultery, he introduces it saying, “Her world-wide fame was equaled by the infamy of her shamelessness.”<sup>105</sup> While he has previously claimed that her husband is the reason for the majority of her fame, this indicates that her reputation stood on its own. At the very least, it was substantial enough that it was equal to the infamy resulting from her infidelity. In conjunction with his previous statement, it appears that Boccaccio is reluctant to blatantly approve of an unfaithful woman, but does not want to fully condemn her for her behavior either.

He begins by describing her noble birth and her role as empress. He writes: “She was the daughter of Antoninus Pius Augustus and his wife Faustina, and she was the wife of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus ... When her father died, she ruled together with her husband and by decree of the Senate was called Augusta, which at that time was not a small honor for a woman.”<sup>106</sup> This description positions her in a place that is superior to the other women of her time. While he has

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<sup>104</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (New York: Ithaca Press, 2011), 221.

<sup>105</sup> Boccaccio, 221.

<sup>106</sup> Boccaccio, 221.

previously said that she has gotten more credit for her husband's actions than her own, nothing has yet happened for his reputation to supersede hers. Her status and title alone make her noteworthy, as he goes on to explain: "Although emperors had previously been called Augustus, I do not find any empress before this one who was granted the name Augusta by decree of the Senate."<sup>107</sup> She is the first Augusta and is given an honor that is not distinctly connected to her husband. Rather than this being a standard naming convention for the wives of Roman emperors, it is a special honor given to her because she rules alongside him, rather than being his inferior.

Before he describes her adultery, he also lists her other common and physical virtues. He writes, "She was of such exquisite beauty that something divine seemed to have been infused into her mortal body.... Although in these [portraits and engravings] the expression of the face, the movement of the eyes, the vivid complexion, and the cheerfulness of the face are lacking, nevertheless the features show great beauty."<sup>108</sup> While he does not explicitly describe anything other than her beauty, he does give the reader insight into her character. Not only is she beautiful, but he has implied that she is animated and vivacious. She is cheerful and the artwork to immortalize her has no ability to mimic her in reality. In conjunction with her beauty and power, she has all the characteristics of an ideal woman.

Her adultery is outlined at length and this indicates that her illegitimate son is the biggest proof of her shortcomings. Boccaccio writes, "It was believed that in addition to her husband she was not satisfied with one lover but enjoyed the embraces of many. Disrepute has made known the names of some of them. Among her lovers were Vectilus, Orfitus, and then Moderatus, but the one who was preferred to all the others was called Terculus, whom, it is said, Marcus

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<sup>107</sup> Boccaccio, 221.

<sup>108</sup> Boccaccio, 221.

Aurelius found dining with her.”<sup>109</sup> He tells the reader that not only is she adulterous, but she has several lovers and is caught with one of them by her husband, much like Medb. The discovery of her affair paints Faustina Augusta in a negative light. However, like Ailill, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus chooses to dismiss her behavior, choosing a cleansing ritual over sentencing her to death as his advisors suggest. It isn’t until she is ill and reveals her affairs to her husband of her own accord that it becomes an issue that he deals with directly.

Of all her lovers, the most transgressive choice was that of the gladiator that ultimately earned her the scorn of her husband and his advisors. Boccaccio writes, “Most shameful of all, it is said that she loved a certain gladiator so much that because of her desire for him she became dangerously ill. Wishing to be cured, she told Marcus Aurelius of her lust.”<sup>110</sup> After a discussion of her affair with her son-in-law, it is strange that the nameless and unrelated gladiator is the most shameful of the lovers that she took. This can be attributed to a difference in class, rather than the lustful behavior that we expect her to be condemned for (and indeed, which she has already been criticized for). Much like the society presented in *Amis and Amiloun*, the greatest transgression in this affair is the union of two people from such drastically different social stations. The nameless and unidentifiable gladiator is a threat to any offspring that Faustina Augusta may have, as the child’s lineage would be questionable at best. Furthermore, it indicates a conflation of social classes that would be a threat to a society so defined by social differences and expectations.

Indeed, the behavior of her son is attributed to her relations with the doomed gladiator. Though he is killed and his blood is used to create a medical cure for her passion, her son’s

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<sup>109</sup> Boccaccio, 221.

<sup>110</sup> Boccaccio, 221.

character and reputation is tainted by the lowly status of his potential father. Boccaccio writes, “Prudent men, however, believed this remedy to be merely a fiction, since Commodus Antoninus, who was conceived at that time, lent weight through his wicked deeds (by reason of which he was thought to be the son of the gladiator rather than of Marcus Aurelius) to the belief that he was the fruit not of the blood-anointment but rather of his mother’s lying with the gladiator.”<sup>111</sup> There is no indication that Commodus Antoninus is definitively *not* the child of Marcus Aurelius. However, her adultery allows those who think poorly of him to attribute it to her adulterous behavior rather than any fault of Marcus Aurelius. The conception of Commodus Antoninus at a time when his mother’s chastity was questionable means that his “wicked deeds” are a result of the mingling of classes in the relationship between Faustina Augusta and the gladiator.

However, Faustina Augusta recognizes the disgraceful nature of her lust for a man that is lower in standing than she and approaches her husband. After the completion of a cleansing ritual, his counsellors advise that he have her severely punished or killed for her transgression, but Marcus Aurelius is more forgiving than the reader might expect. Boccaccio writes, “When these things became known to Faustina’s shame, Marcus Aurelius was urged by his friends to kill her, or at least disown her, which seemed more humane. But Aurelius, who was a gentle man, refused to follow their advice, although he was greatly distressed by his wife’s adultery. He preferred to bear with her rather than incur more shame.”<sup>112</sup> Much like Ailill, Marcus Aurelius is distressed by the potential harm of his wife’s behavior to his own position. However, he doesn’t want to punish her with physical harm. Instead, he acknowledges that he requires her to be in

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<sup>111</sup> Boccaccio, 222.

<sup>112</sup> Boccaccio, 222.

good standing for his own rule to remain unquestioned. Boccaccio writes, “To the friends who advised him he answered only that on divorcing her he would have to give back her dowry, wanting them to understand by this that he ruled because of Faustina.”<sup>113</sup> Despite her adultery, Marcus Aurelius is very aware of their mutual dependency for the preservation of their image and their rule. Her financial stability allows him to maintain his control over Rome and his leniency with her body allows her to maintain her position of power, despite her transgression.

The acceptance of her adulterous behavior is reinforced by Boccaccio’s turn away from this aspect of her biography before concluding that she was ultimately worthy of praise. He writes, “But enough of this, for we must remember that very often even the most honest make mistakes in their work... At Marcus Aurelius’ request the Senate raised her to a place among the gods, and afterwards she was known as the goddess Faustina... Thus, for a certain time Faustina was treated as a famous goddess, so that the glory which lasciviousness had taken from her might be restored by her divinity.”<sup>114</sup> The conclusion of her biography reinstates her earlier status as a praiseworthy woman. Boccaccio’s dismissal of her shortcomings as mere mistakes made by an otherwise good woman reinforces that her lustfulness does not overshadow her good qualities. Her reputation and glory after death also indicates that her adultery was not enough to strip the honorable woman of her unique nature. She is the first woman named Augusta and she is venerated as a goddess after her death, despite her shortcomings. This echoes Christian values of redemption through repentance, but also indicates that in the medieval Italian understanding of the pre-Christian culture of the Romans, consummation of sexual desire outside of marriage was not to be considered an irredeemable act and was much less problematic than the transgression of

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<sup>113</sup> Boccaccio, 222.

<sup>114</sup> Boccaccio, 222.

class boundaries. Her ability to rule exceptionally in conjunction with her husband is what grants her a position within the book and he defends his inclusion of her despite her actions.

### CLEOPATRA, QUEEN OF EGYPT

Though viewed less positively than Faustina Augusta, the famous tale of Cleopatra holds an interesting place in Boccaccio's account of famous women. Cleopatra's biography is two to three times longer than the average biography contained within the collection. Of the five and a half pages detailing her life, only one page is devoted to describing her lustful pursuits, while the rest are dedicated to her other vices. In comparison to Faustina Augusta, her adultery is much less central to her story, but she is condemned more thoroughly for her wickedness in other respects and so is unredeemed by Boccaccio's narration of her life.

Rather than beginning the story with a summation of her virtues and her nobility, Boccaccio discounts any influence her lineage might have had on her legacy and fame. He writes:

Cleopatra was an Egyptian woman who became an object of gossip for the whole world. Although she was the descendant of Ptolemy, the son of Lagus and king of Macedonia, though a long line of kings, and the daughter of Ptolemy Dionysus, or of King Minos as some are pleased to think, she nevertheless came to rule through crime. She gained glory for almost nothing else than her beauty, while on the other hand she became known throughout the world for her greed, cruelty and lustfulness.<sup>115</sup>

Her disreputable ascent to the throne is Boccaccio's first condemnation of her behavior and he lists lustfulness as only one of her vices after greed and cruelty. Cleopatra's infidelity and adultery are part of the motivation for his condemnation, but in conjunction with these other

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<sup>115</sup> Boccaccio, 192.



vices, he does not present a redeemable portrait of her like he does with Faustina Augusta. Instead, it is only part of the portrait that makes her infamous, rather than praiseworthy.

Before turning to her adultery, Boccaccio sets Cleopatra up as an ambitious, blood-thirsty, and cruel woman. He dismisses the tendency for the Egyptians to marry within their own families, not marking her incest as particularly problematic, despite condemning Semiramis for her incest earlier. In the condemnation of Cleopatra, he instead turns to her murder of Lysanias. He writes, “Cleopatra, burning with the desire to rule, as some say, poisoned the innocent fifteen-year-old boy who was both her brother and her husband, and ruled the kingdom alone.”<sup>116</sup> Rather than focusing on her adultery immediately after her virtuous lineage, Boccaccio chooses to highlight her other crimes, because these are going to be the focusing of his description of her. He then discusses another crime that he claims she is directly responsible for – the instigation of her husband’s murder of the man who installed him as king. All of this occurs before her famous interaction with Caesar, which is the first instance of her lustfulness that he cites.

Not only is Cleopatra condemned for her lustfulness, but her manipulation of Caesar’s desires also leads to his condemnation by Boccaccio. He writes, “Armed with wiles and great self-confidence, Cleopatra arrived in royal splendor. Thinking that she would obtain her kingdom if she could draw Caesar, the conqueror of the world, into lustfulness, and being very beautiful and captivating anyone she desired with her shining eyes and her eloquence, with little trouble she brought the lustful prince to her embraces.”<sup>117</sup> Cleopatra’s appeal enchants Caesar and draws him to her, though she has little difficulty doing so, because of his own desires. However, it is not only the adultery that Boccaccio takes issue with here. He specifically explains that it is her

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<sup>116</sup> Boccaccio, 192.

<sup>117</sup> Boccaccio, 193.

greed for power and her desire to rule her kingdom that inspires her decision. When read alongside his earlier description of her behaviors and the motivation behind her murder of her first husband, it becomes clear that it is not the adultery that is the root of this problem, but rather her greed and ambition. The adultery is merely a symptom of this greater sin.

Cleopatra receives her kingdom because of her seduction of Caesar and it is at that time that she devolves into the polygamous figure that Boccaccio is condemning. He writes:

Almost as if he owed her payment for her crime, and because she had been loyal, Caesar gave the kingdom of Egypt to Cleopatra, who desired nothing else.... Thus Cleopatra, having already acquired her kingdom through two crimes, gave herself to her pleasures. Having become almost the prostitute of Oriental kings, and greedy for gold and jewels, she not only stripped her lovers of these things with her art, but it was also said that she emptied the temple and the sacred places of the Egyptians of their vases, statues, and other treasures.<sup>118</sup>

Her adultery is here labeled as a crime and one that she rewarded for. The idea that she “gave herself to pleasures” is where her true lustfulness is noted. Any restraint that she may have had before is given up upon her successful attainment of the kingdom she has been striving to possess. Her rendering in the language of prostitutes is the greatest condemnation of her behavior that Boccaccio can offer.<sup>119</sup> According to this interpretation of her figure, she accepts wealth and symbols of power as payment for sex. It claims that she is “*almost* the prostitute of Oriental kings,” but this implies that the pleasure she gains from her affairs sets her apart from prostitutes

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<sup>118</sup> Emphasis mine; Boccaccio, 193.

<sup>119</sup> This is slightly complicated by his representation of the prostitute Flora in *De Mulieribus Claris*, who is deified after her death by the Roman senate because of her generosity in gifting her wealth to the Roman people. Elsa Filosa discusses her role in the text in her introduction to *Tre Studi sul De Mulieribus Claris* and labels her as negative in her analysis of the women in the text, but her deification indicates that her benevolence ultimately erased her transgression from her remembrance; Filosa, 19-20, 186.

themselves who must ply their trade to survive. In doing so, Boccaccio highlights the difference between Cleopatra's motives and station and that of the average prostitute.

The most famous of these affairs is that with Marc Antony, the disastrous effects of which are blamed on Cleopatra. Not only is she said to have gone "to meet him and easily ensnared that lustful man with her beauty and wanton eyes,"<sup>120</sup> but "the wicked woman, already knowing Antony's character, did not fear to ask him for the kingdoms of Syria and Arabia."<sup>121</sup> Knowing that Antony is attracted to her and wants to give her the gift she has asked for, she is able to manipulate him. Boccaccio verifies this, writing, "It seemed to [Antony] that this was a serious and unseemly thing; nevertheless, to satisfy the desire of the woman he loved, he gave her a small piece of both countries. And he added also all the cities where are near the Syrian shore between Egypt and the river Eleutherus."<sup>122</sup> Antony's acknowledgment of the impropriety of his behavior is attributed to his immense love and desire for Cleopatra. According to the text, she has enticed him into giving her the territories she wanted and he dismisses his moral misgivings over his love for her. While this helps vilify Cleopatra, Boccaccio is also dismissing Antony's own agency in the choice and making this woman more powerful than the man who is granting her control of these lands.

After outlining her adultery, Boccaccio returns to his primary focus: her greed and ambition. He describes the dinner at which Cleopatra proves her wealth by casually drinking a dissolved pearl and then moves on to her ever-expanding desire for more lands, commenting on the way that the power dynamics between Antony and Cleopatra function. He writes:

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<sup>120</sup> Boccaccio, 193.

<sup>121</sup> Boccaccio, 194.

<sup>122</sup> Boccaccio, 194.

As the insatiable woman's craving for kingdoms grew day by day, to grasp everything at once she asked Antony for the Roman empire [...] Good Lord, how great was the audacity of the woman who requested this! And the madness of the man who promised it was no less! How generous was this man who so rashly gave away to an entreating woman an empire which had just been gained after so many centuries.<sup>123</sup>

The emphasis on Cleopatra's role in the request is, once again, the focus of Boccaccio's interpretation of the situation. He describes her as insatiable and audacious, rather than lustful and once again indicates that these are the greatest crimes she has committed. In addition, he emphasizes the earnestness that Antony tries to give these lands to Cleopatra. Not only is she negatively represented for her vices, but she is also usurping the role of a submissive woman in doing so. He is praised for his generosity, while she is condemned for her request. In conjunction with her greed and her adultery, her audacity is enough to tarnish any good she might have been praised as a strong ruler of her people. Ultimately, when narrating her death after the asp venom, Boccaccio writes, "In this sleep the wretched woman put an end to her greed, her concupiscence, and her life,"<sup>124</sup> combining these faults into one final summation.

### SEMIRAMIS, QUEEN OF THE ASSYRIANS

Semiramis is the earliest of the women discussed in this chapter, but is one of the most complex women within the text. Semiramis is a queen of divine parentage who ruled over her kingdom for her young son, took many lovers, and reportedly invented the chastity belt out of jealousy. She is a much-discussed figure, especially in comparison with her presentation by Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, and others. Julia Simmons Holderness highlights this in her essay

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<sup>123</sup> Boccaccio, 195.

<sup>124</sup> Boccaccio, 196.

“Feminism and the Fall: Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, and Louise Labé,” writing, “Boccaccio paints Semiramis as almost but not quite manly – an example of military and political *virtú*, undone in the end by her innate feminine licentiousness.”<sup>125</sup> Contrary to this assumption, this chapter argues that Boccaccio’s representation of her is positive, excluding the one blemish on her character – her promiscuity. While it is not adultery, her physical relationships with many men as a widow tarnishes her reputation. In addition, the rumors of incestuous desires further harm his portrayal. Despite this, he has a generally positive view of her throughout the text that is amended based on her faults at the end of his account.

As usual, he begins with her parentage and legacy. While pointing out that she comes from a good lineage, Boccaccio indicates that she is a good example of a queen and any flaws she may possess are unrelated to her standing and birth. He writes that “Semiramis was a glorious and very ancient queen of the Assyrians, but time has denied us knowledge of her parents. Moreover, since the ancients liked myths, they said that she was the daughter of Neptune ... Although this story should not be believed, it is an indication that she was born of noble parents.”<sup>126</sup> In addition to setting her up as a potentially positive example, the first paragraph of her biography also details her performance of the typical feminine gender role. She is married to a good and wealthy man, bears him a son, and is queen.

When her husband dies, she helps her kingdom by reigning in her son’s stead until he is old enough to do so on her own. While this is an unusual action for a woman to take, it is not

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<sup>125</sup> Julia Simmons Holderness, “Feminism and the Fall: Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, and Louise Labé,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2004), 97.

<sup>126</sup> Boccaccio, 4.

inherently negative. The text is littered with stories of successful female rulers. Boccaccio, however, seems to take issue with the manner in which she does so. He writes:

She was so spirited that she, though a woman, dared undertake to rule with skill and intelligence those nations which her valiant husband had subjugated with arms and governed by force. Having conceived a great stratagem, she first proceeded with feminine wiles to deceive her late husband's army.... Taking advantage of this resemblance [to her son], she always wore a turban and kept her arms and legs covered so that in the future nothing might disclose her deceit.<sup>127</sup>

The response to Semiramis in her introduction here is mixed. While Boccaccio admits her "skill and intelligence" as a ruler, he also says that she was clever to hide her deception of the men around her. Her intelligence as a ruler is understood as something to be praised, while her crossdressing and violation of gendered dress and behavior codes is understood to be more negative, particularly when using words such as "feminine wiles" and "deceit." Even in these first few sentences describing Semiramis, Boccaccio's mixed opinion of her is obvious.

The aspects that he is most willing to openly praise her for are her intellect, her accomplishment, and her prowess as a leader. Her ability to rule and her success is not marred by revelation of her gender. The description of this is extended and deserves careful attention. Boccaccio writes, "Having assumed royal majesty, she preserved it and the rule of the armies, and by pretending very carefully to be a man she achieved many things which would have been great and noble even for the strongest of men. She spared herself no labors, feared no dangers, and with her unheard-of deeds overcame the envy of all men."<sup>128</sup> Semiramis' royal dignity is not being called into question here: she is perfect for the role. Unlike Cleopatra, she does not have to commit any serious crimes to achieve her position. However, she is also not ruling in her own

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<sup>127</sup> Boccaccio, 4-5.

<sup>128</sup> Boccaccio, 5.

stead, but must use deception to secure her power. It is especially important that her succession exceed any limitations of gender. Indeed, she is so good at these tasks that she surpasses the vices of other men, rather than catering to them like Cleopatra had and without forcing herself into a position of overt subjugation to a man in a political and marital sense like Faustina Augusta.

Not only is she not subjugated to a man when she is in control of the armies and the country, but she is able to stand on her own as a woman when she removes her disguise for the men around her. Ultimately, this is a positive thing for her and perceptions of her. Her biography reads, “Finally she did not fear to reveal to everyone who she really was and how with womanly deceit she had pretended to be a man. It was almost as if she wanted to show that in order to govern it is not necessary to be a man, but to have courage. This fact heightened that woman’s glorious majesty as much as it gave rise to admiration in those who looked upon her.”<sup>129</sup> The association of deception with a woman is a theme that continues throughout the other biographies, but the acceptance of Semiramis’ deception is unique. Her disguise as a man allowed her to prove to those that followed her that her sex has nothing to do with her ability to lead them. Her success causes opinion of her to grow and recognition of her deeds to be more widespread and this impacts her representation within the biography as well. Clearly the fact that her men respect and admire her influences the esteem that Boccaccio holds her in, especially as he spends two of the three pages of her biography narrating her accomplishments both before and after she revealed her deception to the men in control of her armies, echoing the narrator’s own forgiveness of her actions.

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<sup>129</sup> Boccaccio, 5.

Once again, the positive achievements of a woman's life are overshadowed by her sexual exploits outside of marriage. Boccaccio writes, "But with one wicked sin this woman stained all these accomplishments worthy of perpetual memory, which are not only praiseworthy for a woman but would be marvelous even for a vigorous man."<sup>130</sup> Once again, he insists on her equality with a man in the deeds she managed to accomplish. However, his praise for her cannot stand without some account of her faults as well and it is at this moment that he introduces the negative parts of her story.

Her biggest fault is not just that she has sex outside of marriage. While she is a widow and has no husband to commit adultery against, she finds an even more disgraceful outlet for her sexual appetites – incest. To compound this, by having sex with her son and taking control of his empire, she strips him of his masculinity. Boccaccio writes:

It is believed that this unhappy woman, constantly burning with carnal desire, gave herself to many men. Among these lovers, and this is something more beastly than human, was her own son Ninus, a very handsome young man. As if he had changed sex with his mother, Ninus rotted away idly in bed, while she sweated in arms against her enemies. Oh, what a wicked thing this is!<sup>131</sup>

His negative representation of her desire is in agreement with the other women discussed here. However, the assertion that Semiramis' particular desire "is something more beastly than human" is directly linked to her incestuous desire for her son. In a society that is part of the boundary between the late Middle Ages and the beginnings of the Italian Renaissance, the indication that a behavior is animalistic is a grave insult. By reducing her desires to those of an animal, Semiramis is effectively lessened in the eyes of the reader. Furthermore, her transgression is more than sex, or even incestuous sex, but the reversal of roles with the man who

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<sup>130</sup> Boccaccio, 6.

<sup>131</sup> Boccaccio, 6.



should be in charge of her. Like Cleopatra, her usurpation of a male role is part of her shame, even though previously her successes had been celebrated.

In detailing Semiramis' death, Boccaccio does not return to her virtues, instead choosing to focus on the variations within the stories of the method of her death. Each one goes back to her sin of lust leading to her murder at the hands of her son, regardless of his motivation for killing her.<sup>132</sup> She is ultimately described as "the wicked queen" in the concluding sentence of her biography,<sup>133</sup> but considering the earlier praise of her achievements and cleverness cause this accusation to ring hollow. Rather than being able to directly condemn or support her, Boccaccio praises her heavily for the majority of the text and then must explain how her image came to be negatively tainted by her actions. In doing so, his disapproval reads as forced and disconnected from the story of her that he has been telling. While he must condemn her lustfulness and her incestuous desire, it is her only fault and does not seem to be enough to completely dismiss her as a negative figure like he does Cleopatra or forgive her faults like he does Faustina Augusta.

Each of these figures demonstrates the ambiguous interpretations of sexually nonconformist women by the Boccaccian narrator. Cleopatra, Faustina Augusta, and Semiramis demonstrate the complex response that an evaluation of a life, especially a female life, entails. Though they may be adulterous and incestuous, they are much more than that. Their true virtues or transgressions are judged by their other actions, leaving their redemption possible. While it is irresponsible to conflate the views of the author and the narrator, it is clear that the narrator's

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<sup>132</sup> The narrator is uncertain of the motivation behind her murder. He writes, "Either because he [her son, Ninus] could not bear seeing her with many other lovers, or because he thought that his mother's dishonor brought him shame, or perhaps because he feared that children might be born to succeed to the throne, he killed the wicked queen in anger."; Boccaccio, 7.

<sup>133</sup> Boccaccio, 7.

opinion is much more dynamic and involving than the reader may initially think. As Migiel points out, “The narrators and authority figures in these works – even in the scholarly *De Mulieribus* – never prove as reliable and consistent as we might like.”<sup>134</sup> Ultimately, as Migiel points out in her analysis of Boccaccio, he leaves it up to his reader to decide how they interpret each of these historical figures. As narrator, he simply presents the reader with the evidence and his own narratorial opinion, but leaves the final decision up to the audience, best exemplified when he writes positively of Artemesia, “But let whoever reads this believe what he likes, for ... these still remain the deeds of a woman.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Migiel, 172.

<sup>135</sup> Boccaccio, 127.

## CONCLUSION

In each of the preceding chapters, I have presented the trend in medieval literature to depict women who skirt the edges of sexual nonconformity. Across each culture, women who engage in sexual acts outside of the confines of marriage are presented and their behavior is judged. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Medb is affirmed in her adultery and supported in her deviation from expected behavior when she is supported by both recensions of the text, compromising with the patriarchal order that attempts to oppress her. In *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrun Ósvífrsdóttir skirts the borders of adultery in arranging her coming marriages and changing the political landscape of Iceland. Alongside her, her predecessors and rivals demonstrate the range of behaviors that literary women can engage in to resist patriarchal subordination, with characters like Auð and Jorunn demonstrating that sometimes nonconformity is more rewarding than expected behavior.

Moving forward in time, in *Amis and Amiloun*, Belisaunt engages in premarital sex with Amis and creates an opportunity for gratification of her desire that ultimately places her and her counterpart, Lady Amiloun, in a tense, potentially adulterous, husband-swapping situation. While Belisaunt is celebrated and rewarded at the end of the romance, despite her sacrifice of her children and her father's honest steward, Lady Amiloun is villainized for condemning her husband's deception and moving against him. In *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, the Carle's daughter uses premarital sex in a similar fashion to advance her family's standing and is rewarded with her marriage to Gawain and their introduction to Camelot society as a unit. Finally, in *De mulieribus claris*, Semiramis' biography is irresolute which makes her comparison to figures like Faustina Augusta and Cleopatra particularly useful. Faustina Augusta is ultimately

released from a negative depiction, Cleopatra is thoroughly damned for her adultery, while Semiramis' representation falls between the two.

Cleopatra's condemnation for her greed-motivated adultery and Faustina's release from condemnation for her class-transgressing adultery demonstrate that it isn't the act of sexual nonconformity that is negative, but the motivation for the act. In the case of Medb, her nonconformity is designed to help her maintain her sovereignty, but also help her army and the people of Connacht. Similarly, Belisaunt, the Carle's daughter, Guðrun, and Unn the Deep-minded are rewarded for the nonconformity, because they are engaging in sexual behaviors that benefit their respective families or civilizations, while also advancing the social position of women. On the other side of the divide, Lady Amiloun, Cleopatra, Semiramis, and Faustina Augusta are condemned when their desire manifests itself in less beneficial ways, whether it is ambition, class transgression, or (warranted) disloyalty to their husband. While Faustina Augusta and Semiramis are at least partially redeemed through behavioral reformation and sovereign ability, they are initially part of this condemned group and ultimately represent the complicated nature of character evaluation in medieval literary texts.

Considering each of these texts, cultures, and women together presents a depiction of medieval literary women that expands beyond the strictures set by feminist medieval literary criticism up to this point. The tendency to judge all medieval cultures based on preconceptions about religious values is disproven as women who refuse to conform to expectations of exclusively marital, procreative intercourse are judged based on the consequences of their actions and the motivations for them. While such a tendency may appear to indicate that women are tools of the patriarchy, their direct resistance of the patriarchal norm says the opposite. By engaging in sexual nonconformity, these women reclaim bodily sovereignty and, in some cases,

force patriarchal societies into accepting their unexpected assistance in preserving social order. They must ultimately accept that these women are “right to behave thus” when they are benefitting their families and nations,<sup>136</sup> but that they also must compromise in their nonconformity in order to continue to be accepted by the societies they support.

What this project offers to the scholarly community more broadly is an analysis of these texts that shifts away from the dichotomous classifications of good or bad women, positive or negative exempla, and accepted or rejected figures. Up to now, much of feminist scholarship has tended to attempt to shoehorn these figures into a direct opposition or compliance with patriarchal norms and social expectations. The comparative literature approach taken in this project allows a more complicated reading to emerge: these women are resisting the patriarchy while still functioning well within it. My approach is grounded in my initial reading of *TBC* that suggests a tolerance of sexual nonconformity for socially appropriate reasons, but also in the broader cultural implications of a comparison between the texts. What reading these texts together enables the reader to see is that women’s resistance is successful without pushing themselves completely outside of the boundaries their societies place on them. It allows these nonconformist women to obtain their sexual desires and exercise a sovereignty that would typically be denied them.

In the end, the judgment that is placed on them is more directly related to how greatly their nonconformity disturbs their societies and whether they are motivated by ultimately selfish reasons. If their resistance to social expectation leads to a better social position for their families, their armies, or their people, these women are praised for their efforts or rewarded with a happy

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<sup>136</sup> *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 155.

ending and personal sovereignty. If their desires are motivated by greed or ambition, then they are chastised by the text for their transgression with death or disgrace.

In the future, I hope to expand this project to discuss intersections of gender and sexuality across other cultures, including those of Northern Africa and the Middle East. The current limitations of this project are twofold: linguistic and temporal, though not temporal in the typical sense. As a master's thesis, this project has a limited amount of time and space in which to explore these connections and each chapter could benefit from a more expansive approach to each text. In addition, I am unable to talk about some of the more closely connected texts of the Middle Ages, simply because of a lack of familiarity with their languages. Between England and Italy there is the inevitable connection of France and between Ireland and England there are Welsh sources to consider. Latin and Christian influence further tie all of these cultures together, but my ability to expand into Latin sources was limited only to Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* in the interest of time. Moving forward, I believe that there are further comparisons to be drawn between Pagan, Christian, and Islamic cultures, but this will also necessarily be limited by the depth available to a project of such breadth. However, the implications of this project are that the anxiety over sexual nonconformity among women in the Middle Ages is centered not on the act itself, but on the social implications of their nonconformity, which opens up a new avenue of comparative, feminist, and sexuality studies scholarship to be applied to medieval literature.

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## VITA

### Education

M.A. in English, University of Mississippi, 2015 – 2018

Greek and Latin Summer School, University College Cork, 2016

B.A. in English, University of Mississippi, 2015, *magna cum laude*

### Professional History

Teaching Assistant, Department of English, 2015 – current

Teaching Assistant, Department of Modern Languages, 2015 – current

### Papers Delivered

“Medb in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*: Sovereignty and Powerful Female Sexuality,” 53rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 2018

“Women in Control: Looming Infidelity in *Amis and Amiloun* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*,” Vagantes Conference on Medieval Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 2018

“Medb in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*: Evolutions of a Powerful Woman,” Southeastern Medieval Association 56th Annual Conference, The College of Charleston and the Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina, November 2017

“Tools for Thinking and Teaching: Deep Mapping the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*,” Terra Digita: Digital Approaches to Medieval Mapping, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, November 2017

“Medb in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*: Sovereignty Goddess or Mortal Ruler?,” 16th Annual Vagantes Conference on Medieval Studies, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, March 2017.

“No Boys Allowed: Gender Hybrids in Ovid and Boccaccio” in session titled “Cross-dressing and Crossing Boundaries,” Southeastern Medieval Association 55th Annual Conference, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, October 2016

“Away from the Author and Toward the Creative: Fandoms as Digital Subcultures,” Digitorium: University of Alabama Digital Humanities Conference, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, March 2016

“The Public and Secret Lives of Women: Rumor and Story-Telling in Boccaccian Narrative,” Southeastern Medieval Association 54th Annual Conference, University of Central Arkansas, North Little Rock, AR, October 2015

“Elevation, Virtue, and Suffering: Themes of Impossible Love in Fourteenth Century Narrative,” 9th Annual Meeting in the Middle, Longwood University, Farmville, VA, 2015