

**Women's Stories, Male Voices:  
Narratives of Female Misbehavior in Medieval Europe**

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## **Abstract**

Medieval narrative accounts of female misbehaviour reflect deep social perceptions and expectations grounded in ideas of gender. The women described in the twelfth-century non-fiction narratives analysed in this thesis had not behaved in an objectively “bad” way, judged by legal or moral standards. Rather, the disapproving depiction of women’s behaviour reflects the author’s concern with the women’s goals and intentions, rather than their specific actions. In all the episodes I analysed, I found a search for autonomy and independence from social and cultural control on the part of the women. It is this wilful desire for autonomy that incurs the medieval authors’ disapproval.

The first chapter focuses on marital choice, one of the few areas of medieval social life in which young women could express a certain degree of independent judgement in spite of familial, social, and cultural constraints. I argue that female resistance to outside pressure is often depicted in exaggerated misogynistic tones. On the other hand, female behaviour which inspires the approval of an author is often transposed into masculine characteristics.

In the second chapter, the focus shifts to widowhood. In narrative depictions of widows, the deep connection between the exercise of female autonomy and medieval misogynistic discourse emerges. Medieval perceptions of gender necessarily rested on the core concept of female subordination as natural and necessary to social organization. Actions that challenged this assumption were invariably cast in a negative light. Widows seeking to sever the ties that bound them to male guardians are represented in highly critical terms.

## Résumé

Les comptes rendus narratifs médiévaux du mauvais comportement des femmes sont profondément ancrés dans des perceptions sociales et des attentes qui découlent de notions du genre. Les femmes décrites dans ces récits non fictifs du douzième siècle et qui font l'objet de ce mémoire n'ont pas eu un mauvais comportement selon les normes légales ou morales de l'époque. Ce sont les objectifs et les intentions des femmes, plutôt que leurs gestes précis qui figurent comme source d'inquiétude dans ces textes. Dans tous les épisodes analysés, j'ai découvert une quête d'autonomie et d'indépendance des femmes par rapport aux contrôles social et culturel. C'est ce désir volontaire d'autonomie qui suscite la désapprobation des auteurs médiévaux.

Le premier chapitre est axé sur le choix matrimonial, un des rares domaines de la vie sociale médiévale où les jeunes femmes pouvaient exprimer un certain jugement indépendant en dépit des contraintes familiales, sociales et culturelles. Je soutiens que la résistance des femmes à la pression extérieure est souvent représentée sur des tons misogynes exagérés. D'autre part, le comportement féminin qui inspire l'approbation d'un auteur est souvent transposé en caractéristiques masculines.

Dans le deuxième chapitre, l'accent est mis sur la question du veuvage. Dans les représentations narratives des veuves, le lien profond entre l'exercice de l'autonomie féminine et le discours misogyne médiéval émerge. La perception médiévale du genre des sexes reposait forcément sur le concept central de la subordination des femmes comme étant naturel et nécessaire à l'organisation sociale. Les actions qui font fi de cet ordre des choses furent invariablement narrées de façon négative. Les veuves qui cherchent à briser les liens qui les unissent à leurs gardiens mâles sont notamment représentées en termes très critiques.

## Introduction: “By God, if Wommen Hadde Writen Stories.”

*For trusteth wel, it is an impossible,  
That any cleric wol speke good of wyves,  
but if it be of hooly seintes lyves,  
ne of noon oother womman never the mo.  
[Chaucer, WBT III. 688-691]*

The wife of Bath’s complaint about the misogynistic nature of large part of the medieval discourse on women is not far off the mark. Sources on medieval women are hard to come by, and the few at our disposal are rather problematic. They are usually under-representative, misogynistic, written by men (especially by religious men), addressed to men, strongly influenced by literary and cultural *topoi*, in addition to being narrative sources and therefore inherently problematic. Historians working on medieval women have noted more than once the problematic nature of the available sources, and new approaches have been developed in order to overcome these challenges. Joan Scott has argued in an often cited article that gender is a useful category of historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> In fact, gender is *the* category of analysis that can help historians who are trying to understand the women of the medieval time. In the initial section of her article Scott enumerates a few of the main characteristics of gender as an analytical notion, emphasizing that, “Gender [...] stressed the relational aspect of normative definitions of femininity. Those who worried that women studies’ scholarship focused too narrowly and separately on women used the term “gender” to introduce a relational notion into our analytic vocabulary.”<sup>2</sup> Introducing this relational notion in medieval women’s studies has proved extremely effective.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan W. Scott "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (Decemeber, 1986): 1053-1075.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, “Gender,” 1055.

Due to the scarcity of female appearances in medieval sources, studies of women in the Middle Ages benefit from an approach that makes the most of the available information. By focusing on both sides of the coin, gender works in precisely that way, and by reasoning in terms of gender, historians can learn about medieval women by studying medieval men. The relational aspect of gender supplies, in part, the deficiencies of the primary sources. The object of this thesis is to analyze a selected group of texts, all written by religious men, about female misbehavior. The aim will be not only to achieve as complete as possible an understanding of the events that occurred, but also to attempt, by analysing the workings of gender in the sources, to understand the modes of the medieval discourse on misbehaving women.

This study is heavily indebted to those scholars whose work has enriched our knowledge of medieval women. A rich vein in this scholarship focuses on legal aspects relating to medieval women. Unsurpassed in this field is the contribution of James A. Brundage, especially his work *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*.<sup>3</sup> Brundage has covered the evolution of medieval canon law, and has looked into its relation to medieval sexuality, gender perceptions, and matrimonial practices in great detail. His research provided the necessary contextualization to formulate interpretations of the events narrated in the primary sources. R. H. Helmholz's *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* was also extremely significant.<sup>4</sup> It covers all aspects of the legal practice regarding marriage disputes in Medieval English courts, and is a necessary reading for anyone interested in medieval matrimonial legal practices. Menuge's *Medieval*

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<sup>3</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> R. H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

*Women and the Law* includes several essays focused on the core idea of female autonomy, and was vital to this thesis.<sup>5</sup>

Studies of medieval gender, such as *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, edited by Joel T Rosenthal, and *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe: 900-1200*, by Elizabeth Van Houts, were also particularly useful.<sup>6</sup> The study of masculinities, which has only recently found a spotlight in medieval studies, was of core importance. Among the many works on the subject *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* by D M Hadley was especially useful for the present thesis, particularly with regard to Part Two: “Lay Men and Church Men: Sources of Tension?”<sup>7</sup> This section focused on the complex relation between different, and at times conflicting, ideals of masculinity. *Medieval masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, edited by Clare A Lees, is an interesting collection of essays, above all Jo Ann McNamara’s “Herrenfrage: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150.”<sup>8</sup> *From Boys to Men : Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, by Ruth Mazo Karras, and *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, are two more titles which should be included in this brief list.<sup>9</sup>

Medieval society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was characterized by a complex masculine paradigm. As Jo Ann McNamara has stated “the masculine gender is fragile and tentative. [...] It requires strong social support to maintain fictions of superiority based solely on

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<sup>5</sup> Noel James Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990) and Elizabeth Van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe: 900-1200*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> D. M. Hadley, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. (London and New York: Longman, 1999.)

<sup>8</sup> Clare A. Lees, *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.)

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen; Bonnie Wheeler, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, (New York : Garland Pub., 2000).

a measure of physical strength.”<sup>10</sup> In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the “fictions of superiority” that McNamara was referring to permeated society at all levels. Ideals of masculinity based on the belief that women were the inferior sex permeated medieval Europe’s identity and discourse. These ideals were far from monolithic and simple. Scholars have recently focused on the co-existence, within a general and widespread masculine paradigm, of a plurality of masculinities. At the core of this issue is the problem of religious men’s specific gender identity. Derek Neal’s *The Masculine Self* places the accent on those aspects of medieval masculinity that clerics and laymen shared. Self-restraint, husbandry, courage, honesty were among the qualities that any medieval men should have had.<sup>11</sup> It is no coincidence that women in medieval discourse tended to be characterized by opposite traits. Deceitful, incapable of restraint and control of their appetites, devious, and dishonest: these are but some of the terms chosen by medieval men to designate medieval women. Both the clerical and the feudal system defined their ideal of masculinity in relation, and opposition, to the feminine paradigm.<sup>12</sup> The medieval discourse on female misbehavior was strongly influenced by the respective fears of feudal and clerical orders. Feudal society felt threatened by female autonomy, and found an effective expression of this fear in the elaboration of evil stereotypical female characters in the literature of the time. Stepmothers, witches, and evil old ladies are the incarnation of the fear that women, given the chance, would choose their self-interest over the common good, that is, the preservation of feudal society. The clergy, forced to live a life of celibacy, expressed the fear and unease toward women in a misogynist language which put the emphasis on women’s lustfulness

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<sup>10</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, “Herrenfrage: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150,” *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> D. M. Hadley, “Introduction: Medieval Masculinities,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D.M. Hadley (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 7.



and sexual voraciousness. The typical expressions of these modes of discourse are ubiquitous in medieval literature.

My primary sources consist of a handful of episodes found in William of Malmesbury's *Deeds of the English Kings*, Orderic Vitalis's *Ecclesiastical History*, the *Deeds of Louis the Fat* by Abbot Suger of Saint Denis, the *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln* by Adam of Eynsham, the anonymous *Life of Christina of Markyate*, Galbert of Bruges's *The Murder of Charles the Good*, and Guibert of Nogent's *Memoirs*. All these authors were religious men, and the majority were monks (the sole exception being Galbert of Bruges, probably a secular cleric). While the composition of these works, taken as a whole, spans longer than a century, they enjoy considerable geographical continuity and center in the relatively limited area of England, France and Flanders. These countries shared, at the time, sufficient legal, social, and religious similarities to permit a parallel study of these primary sources.

William of Malmesbury (1095-1143) wrote the *Deeds of the English Kings* in 1125. The work covers English history from the arrival of the Saxons to 1120. The *Ecclesiastical History*, written from 1114 to 1141, is a history of Normandy up to the middle of the eleventh century. The *Deeds of Louis the Fat* was composed by Suger (1080-1151) abbot of Saint Denis, between 1140 and 1144. *The Murder of Charles the Good* was written by Galbert of Bruges in 1127. The memoirs of Guibert of Nogent were written around 1115 at Nogent with the original title *Monodiaie*. The last two sources analyzed here are two hagiographical works: the *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln*, written around 1212, and the *Life of Christina of Markyate*.

The texts I have chosen are organized in two chapters. While medieval men were classified, according to their occupation, as either *bellatores*, *oratores*, or *laboratores*, medieval women were ordered according to their relation to men: they were virgins, wives, or widows.

Wives enjoyed few opportunities for legal and economic independence. For example: “in common law the married couple were but one legal person and that one person was the husband. [...] Married women were *femes couvertes* and their husbands were both their sovereign and their guardians.”<sup>13</sup> Wives would often play key economic roles and work with their husbands in all sorts of trades and crafts; they helped in the administration of the household, whether castle or cottage, but still had little opportunity for independent action. Unmarried girls and widows could take advantage of a relatively higher degree of autonomy. Thus, I will limit my study to sources relating to two moments in medieval women’s lives, when relatively their higher freedom was perceived as a potential threat to the feudal system and enhanced the misogynistic and condemning tones of the writers. The first chapter will focus on women’s behavior in regard to marital choice. The choice of marriage partner became one of the few opportunities which young medieval women -but also men- could take advantage of to successfully impose their own choices. As a consequence of the Church’s insistence on freely given consent as the core aspect of marriage, parental control on the choice of marriage partner was severely limited. The first chapter will focus on the tensions between Church, medieval lay society, and young medieval women which arose as a result of these changes

In the second chapter the focus will shift to widowhood. Widowhood was the time of greatest independence and freedom for most medieval women. Widows were entitled to considerable financial provisions and could administer their household in complete autonomy. They had the possibility of continuing their husband’s trade on their own and to access guilds. If

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<sup>13</sup>Emma Hawkes, “[S]he Will ... Protect and Defend her Rights Boldly by Law and Reason ...’: Women’s Knowledge of Common Law and Equity Courts in Late-Medieval England,” in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noel James Menuge (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000), 146.

they managed to circumvent the pressures of family and in-laws, and decided not to remarry, they could be in charge of their financial resources and free from male control.

A linguistic premise is in order. Misbehavior is here employed not to indicate a conclusive and objective category of reproachable behavior into which female action could or could not fall. There was no such thing as a widely recognized “bad” female behavior. Rather, numerous elements factored in determining the perception of female action as either praiseworthy or reprehensible. The narrative intent of the text is, in this regard, of fundamental importance. As we will see in more detail in the first chapter, hagiographers could approve of behavior which other writers would find unacceptable. The intention of the women was also central. Behavior that would have been acceptable if in line with society’s prescriptions and aimed at the common good was not equally tolerated if motivated by selfish reasons.

I will attempt to analyse, with particular attention to the workings of gender, several primary sources concerning women whose behavior provoked the criticism of the authors. Their actions, rather than being objectively reproachable, are condemned for reasons specific and subjective to each and every case. Thus, my aim will be not to define in a conclusive formulation what constituted female misbehavior in medieval Europe, but rather to investigate how criticism of female action was expressed by male authors, by focusing on the linguistic choices that express the social expectations, perceptions, and interrelations of medieval masculinity and femininity.

An active desire for autonomy and independence emerges with considerable clarity from the sources taken into consideration. All the women analyzed here show a clear aspiration to freedom from social control. These sources are not sufficient to prove that all medieval women wanted to be rid of men. But they do show that at least some medieval women wanted to be able

to make their own choices, that there were ways to pursue this goal, and that women knew how to take advantage of the freedom they were given in order to acquire more autonomy.

**“Car No Vol So C’om Deu Voler”  
Medieval Women and Marital Choice**

*D’aisso’s fa be femna parer  
Ma donma, per qu’e-lho o retrai,  
car no vol so c’om deu voler  
e so c’om li deveda , fai.*

*[Bernard de Ventadorn, Can Vei La Lauzeta Mover]*

## **Introduction**

European society in 1140, when Gratian’s *Decretum* was first published, was radically different from what it had been a century and a half earlier. Changes and developments in the economy, a spectacular increase in the population, the rise of new cities are some of the key twelfth-century developments. Marriage practices were one of many aspects of society to be the object of momentous changes. James Brundage has connected the change in the regulation of marriage practices that started gaining momentum in the twelfth century to the Church Reform movement that peaked during the papacy of Gregory VII.<sup>14</sup> Religious reformers worked to establish the primacy of canon law and Church regulations over disputes that concerned public and private morals. Marriage practices thus fell heavily under the scrutiny of this new group of determined reformists, whose aim was not exclusively theological, but also determined by considerations of a more practical order. The struggle of the Church, as is well known, was chiefly aimed at gaining independence from the aristocratic laity, whose interference in clerical

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<sup>14</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 179-187.

elections and in disputes over the Church's properties was ill-tolerated. Marriage was an important tool of the secular nobility to increase and stabilize wealth and power; thus control over marriage practices could be a tool in the hands of the Church to resist the influence of feudal families.<sup>15</sup> Among the novelties that were introduced in this period were the key ideals of monogamy and indissolubility.<sup>16</sup>

Divorce was more than simply discouraged and endogamy was harshly condemned. The Church's reformers also championed a much stricter policy regarding consanguinity, thus drastically limiting the possibility of marriage with kin, a widespread practice of the aristocracy.<sup>17</sup> These positions reflected what Georges Duby has defined as the "ecclesiastical model of marriage," in sharp contrast with the aristocratic ideal of marriage that had been predominant until the twelfth century.<sup>18</sup> The aristocratic marriage model was founded on the core idea of safeguarding lay society, especially its most fundamental aspect: the family. Houses, or clans, pursued matrimonial policies aimed at strengthening their own power through alliances, while keeping their landed properties as intact as possible. Marriage had a role of such importance for noble families that it was seldom left to individual initiative. The married couple was the core of the clan and the unit from which the next generation would be born. Marriage symbolized much more than the decision of two individuals to share a life: it was an ostensible and ceremonial act, a public demonstration of the pact made between the two houses involved.

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<sup>15</sup> Brundage, *Law*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Medieval society was never truly polygamous. It was frequent for aristocrats to practice what has been termed "serial monogamy," meaning that they felt free and to repudiate legitimate wives and marry again, to pursue political or personal interests. Married noble men habitually kept mistresses in the house, and often the sons of these women would succeed their fathers. To define these practices Duby employed the term "polygamy." (*Women of the Twelfth Century*, 76.)

<sup>17</sup> Brundage, *Law*, 179-187.

<sup>18</sup> Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). For a succinct summary of the innovations introduced with the ecclesiastical marriage: James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 183.

Among some of the chief characteristics of this marriage model was endogamy. Endogamous marriages were frequent and encouraged because they provided families with a way to reunite scattered patrimonies. Another fundamental aspect of the aristocratic marriage was its polygamous nature. In the words of Duby:

This system did not require a monogamous structure. Widowers were perfectly free to remarry and a husband could repudiate his wife. This was permissible not only, as one would expect, in case of adultery, but also if it seemed to be in the interest of the patrimony to take another wife, either because the former wife was slow to give her husband the son who would carry on the house, or, quite simply, because it seemed advantageous to the house to receive a woman of greater value.<sup>19</sup>

The ecclesiastical model was based on theological concerns. The Church viewed marriage as a sacrament: “the sign of the union between God and his creatures, between Christ and his Church.”<sup>20</sup> The Church’s ideological position regarding marriage reflects the contradictions that it was trying to overcome in this regard. Rather than letting the sacrament of marriage be created by consummation (due to the Church’s negative view on sexual activity), pre-eminence was given to consent as the necessary element to create a valid marriage. Strict monogamy and exogamy were required, repudiation was forbidden and remarriage of widowers and widows discouraged.<sup>21</sup>

The slow pre-eminence gained by the ecclesiastical model had important consequences for medieval society. The aristocratic model privileged not only parental control but male supremacy as well. As Duby phrased it: “it is a fact that in this society women never emerged from the strictest subordination.”<sup>22</sup> Virtually all decisions about marriage and divorce were taken

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<sup>19</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 7

<sup>20</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 6.

by men, and women's rights to dower and inheritance were in practice exercised by their male guardians, husbands, brothers, fathers, or sons. But by formulating a model that put freely given consent at the core of marriage validity, "the Church unintentionally tended to take a stand against the power of the heads of households in matters of marriage, against lay conceptions of misalliance, and, indeed, against male supremacy, for it asserted the equality of the sexes in concluding the marriage pact."<sup>23</sup>

I will analyze three episodes of female "misbehavior" in relation to canon law and marriage practices. "Misbehavior" is here employed to indicate female action that was condemned by the authors of the narrative sources that relate the episodes. While all the women that I will discuss below show a considerable, and maybe unusual, degree of determination in the pursuit of their own marital ambition, this autonomy in itself is not the cause of the author's negative opinion. No such thing as a generally accepted negative paradigm of "independent women" emerges from these texts. Rather, the reasons behind the characterization as "misbehavior" of their actions are motivated by different narrative reasons in each text, usually in connection with the general purpose of each author.

These episodes are narrated in different primary sources: William of Malmesbury's *Deeds of the English Kings*, Orderic Vitalis's *Ecclesiastical History*, the *Deeds of Louis the Fat* by Abbot Suger of Saint Denis, the *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln* by Adam of Eynsham, and the anonymous *Life of Christina of Markyate*. With the exception of Christina's *Life*, the women of these episodes are minor characters who make very brief and infrequent appearances in the sources. This is in line with the typical under-representation of women in medieval sources. In court records and legal documents the medieval tendency to focus on men rather than women has

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<sup>23</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 18.



been denounced, among others, by Monica Green.<sup>24</sup> Medieval histories are no exception. Most of the women who are mentioned are queens and noblewomen from the highest levels of society. They are included because their story somehow interlaces with greater events, or touches the lives of greater men. We could say that stories of women are included in medieval narratives when they touch, or interfere with, stories of men, especially of important men. This is true for the two major historical works taken into consideration, the *Deeds of the English Kings* and the *Ecclesiastical History*.

The *Deeds of the English Kings* was written in 1125 by William of Malmesbury, (1095-1143). It covers the period from the arrival of the Saxons in England up until 1120. While it focuses primarily on England, considerable attention is dedicated to the rest of Europe and the general inspiration of the work has been considered “continental.”<sup>25</sup> The *Deeds of the English Kings* aspired to fill the gap where Bede left off, and it was the “second secular national history produced in literary form.”<sup>26</sup> The work was not meant for consultation on specific events; rather, it was written as a piece of literature that one should read in its entirety without skipping ahead.<sup>27</sup> The *Ecclesiastical History* was written from 1114 to 1141 by Orderic Vitalis. Orderic was born in 1075 in England from a Norman father and an English mother. Everything we know about his life is recounted in his own work. His father was a priest, probably from Orleans, who moved to England where he married. When clerical celibacy started being enforced he was able to keep his wife, but at times Orderic still expresses some unease about his parents’ marriage. Orderic spent

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<sup>24</sup> Monica Green, “Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (1989): 434-473

Monica Green, “Documenting Medieval Women's Medical Practice,” in *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. Luis García Ballester (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994): 322-352.

<sup>25</sup> Antonia Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 170.

<sup>26</sup> Grandsen, *Historical Writing*, 167.

<sup>27</sup> Marie Schütt, “The Literary Form of William of Malmesbury’s ‘*Deeds Regum*,’” *The English Historical Review* 46, no. 182 (1931): 255-260.

the first ten years of his life in England and moved to the monastery of Saint Evroul, in Normandy in 1085, according to his father's wishes. The monastery, although located in a dangerous frontier area, managed to thrive. A library and a monastic school soon flourished and a small town prospered at the abbey gates. The monastic community grew and was joined by learned monks who contributed to its prosperity and fame.<sup>28</sup> Orderic, who never sought administrative positions in the monastery, worked in the library as either *armarius* or *bibliothecarius*. He started composing verses, especially epitaphs, in his twenties, and began writing history in his early thirties, starting with the annals of Saint Evroul.<sup>29</sup> The *Ecclesiastic History* is a history of Normandy up to the middle of the eleventh century. It is structured as a universal history, starting with an account of the creation of the world and a life of Jesus, but after the first books the focus narrows on Normandy and England. The general spirit of the work is edificatory: "trying to improve (his readers) prospects of salvation by showing how God punishes the sinful."<sup>30</sup> It is in part with this attitude that Orderic presents his moral judgments, as we shall see below. The *Deeds of Louis the Fat* were composed by Suger (1080-1151) abbot of Saint Denis, between 1140 and 1144. Suger, like Orderic, joined the monastery when he was ten years old, as an oblate. Unlike Orderic he had a keen interest in the monastery administration, which sparkled when he was rather young and led to his increased involvement in the monastery's administration and eventually to his election as abbot. Louis was educated at Saint Denis, and probably met Suger when the two were still young. The friendship grew with time, and Suger was frequently involved in royal administration and was Louis' counselor for many years. The *Deeds of Louis the Fat* is interesting and somewhat different from most medieval historical writings. The main purpose of the text is to give an extremely positive portrayal of

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<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1984), 18.

<sup>29</sup> Chibnall, *The World*, 34

<sup>30</sup> Grandsen, *Historical Writing*, 154.

Luis. Suger chose to do this not by following a chronological narration of his reign, but rather by relating several episodes of the king's life that give a positive impression of his work as a ruler. As we shall see later, this scope was partially achieved by presenting a contrasting portrait of Luis's father Philip I.<sup>31</sup>

The last two sources analyzed here are two hagiographical works: the *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln* and the *Life of Christina of Markyate*. The *Life of Hugh* bishop of Lincoln (1135/1140 - 1200) was completed around 1212, and probably undertaken by Adam of Eynsham during the last years of Hugh's life (Hugh was born in 1040 and died in 1200). Even though it follows the pattern of its genre it is not a typical medieval hagiography. The main scope is presenting Hugh's sanctity and offering a detailed portrait of his extraordinary personality; his most important deeds, for example the struggle to keep the Church independent from the crown, are not documented in great detail. Very few women make an appearance in this text. Usually, they are middle class individuals who have some religious struggle. While the text is not marked by a particularly strong misogynistic attitude, Adam seldom speaks positively of women. The *Life of Christina of Markyate* is equally uncommon, as has been noted by its translators.<sup>32</sup> While themes such as the fight of the young woman to preserve her chastity are typical of female saints' lives, this work often avoids the archetypal elements of the female hagiographical genre. This is the only text of those taken into consideration that centers around a woman and whose portrait is presented positively. The different scope and attitude of the author results in a completely different language and narrative in regard to "unusual" female action.

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<sup>31</sup> Suger, *The Deeds of Luis the Fat*, trans. Richard Cusimano and John Moorhead (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1992), 3.

<sup>32</sup> C.H. Talbot. *The Vita of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxiii.

William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, Abbot Suger, the anonymous monk author of the *Life of Christina of Markyate* and Adam of Eynsham are the authors of the episodes of female “misbehavior” that will be analyzed here. Not only were these writers all men, they were also all monks, thus part of the learned ecclesiastical circles from which much of the literary production of the eleventh and twelfth century originated. Looking at constructions of gender through the words of religious men must be done cautiously. As Kirsten Fenton wrote referring to William of Malmesbury’s work, “this is no simple window into lay ideas, values and practice.”<sup>33</sup> These histories and hagiographies were written by religious authors, but often aimed at a lay public. The writers of these works were trying to establish a dialogue with their lay audience that could convey their own religious values, ideas, and practices. Church and lay society in the eleventh and twelfth century were in the process of renegotiating their respective positions. The Church’s new found matrimonial policies are one of the many examples of these negotiations between the religious and the laity. In reading these stories of women it is imperative to remember that the authors are, above all other more immediate narrative goals, trying to create a channel for the Church’s new values and ideals.

The monastic background of these authors influences their linguistic choices from a gendered point of view. The Church reform that reformulated and changed marriage practices in lay society also changed sexual practices within the clergy. It was with this movement that clerical celibacy was established once and for all. Priests were forbidden from having wives and concubines or from trying to advance their illegitimate children in the Church. This new and much stricter approach to clerical sexuality was enforced with difficulty and in a prolonged period of time. It has been argued that central to its establishment was the development of a new

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<sup>33</sup>Kirsten A. Fenton, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge: Boydell 2008), 27.

gendered clerical identity founded on antagonism toward the female sex. This attitude resulted in an increased misogynistic attitude in clerical thought.<sup>34</sup> The frequency with which femaleness was described, almost routinely, in negative terms by medieval authors is reflected in all these texts, even the *Life of Christina*. When discussing women, ecclesiastical writers of the twelfth century did not seem able to escape the negative attitude typical of the religious environment, an attitude central to defining their own masculine identity. The language of these texts is thus inevitably gendered, and it is through a gendered approach that most can be understood about clerical perceptions of female misbehavior.

I will analyze these episodes from a two-fold point of view. First, attention will be given to the facts: what these women did and how canon law and marriage practices influenced their actions. Second, I will study the language of the authors and their narrative choices to understand how gendered perceptions influenced their writings.

### **The Young Girl from Oxford**

By the twelfth century, the Church's control of marriage practices was well on its way to being firmly established. The number of cases discussed in bishops' courts and other ecclesiastical judicial bodies increased, and customary law was progressively less influential. At the same time, canon law was far from a conclusive form, and debates on a number of issues were still ongoing among theologians and canon lawyers.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Tracy Adams, "Make me Chaste and Continent, But Not Yet : a Model for Clerical Masculinity?" in *Masculinities and Femininities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Frederik Kiefer (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 2.

<sup>35</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* , chapters 6 and 7.

In the *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln*, one interesting episode gives us a glimpse of how the stricter application and formulation of canon law, and the increased ecclesiastical control over marriage practices, were influencing the lives of medieval women. Hugh's *Life* is an unusual medieval history. Adam of Eynsham, the author, was Hugh's chaplain and companion for the last three years of the bishop's life, from 1097 to 1200. He wrote the *Life* soon after Hugh's death, drawing on both memories of his time with Hugh and stories he had been told by Hugh himself. Thus the *Life* enjoys a level of reliability superior to that of most other hagiographical medieval works. While often medieval saints' lives were written decades, or even centuries, after the death of their subject, hence resting primarily on older accounts or oral tradition, and usually involving a certain level of imprecision, the *Life* of Hugh was composed soon after his death by someone who had access to reliable information.

The episode in question took place while Hugh was in the exercise of his judicial duties in the bishop's court. It seems likely that Adam himself was present, so we can tentatively place it in the period between 1197 and 1200. Adam tells us:

A young girl at Oxford, the daughter of one of the burgesses, and already wedded to a certain youth of the same town, was inflamed by a stronger love for another youth, and deserting her husband, actually lived with him as his wife. Her husband accused her and proved the charge, and the bishop earnestly admonished her to return without delay to him. [...] He ordered the husband to give her the kiss of peace, which he would willingly have done, but the wretched girl impudently spat in his face, although [the husband] was near the altar and the bishop himself was present in the church with many important ecclesiastics and a multitude of the faithful.<sup>36</sup>

Adam lays out a seemingly straightforward narrative, clearly presenting us with villains, the girl and her mother "who showed herself another Herodias in her wicked advice to her daughter,"<sup>37</sup> and a hero, Hugh himself. But while Adam clearly did not wish or expect his readers to

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<sup>36</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1962), vol. 2. 31.

<sup>37</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life*, 2: 31.

challenge the story as he presents it, a few inconsistencies put in question his representation of the events.

The girl's family seems to have been an established middle class one, as denoted by Adam's expression: "the daughter of a burgess of the city." Of her family members the only one who receives any attention is the girl's mother. Adam resorts to the stereotypical use of Herodias, a reproachable biblical character, to symbolize the woman's indecent feminine behavior. While his objective is to represent the woman as wicked, stubborn, and disrespectful of Hugh's authority, it is precisely his choice to underline the determination of the girl's mother to defend the legitimacy of her daughter's marital status that gives away Adam's omissions. The wife of a respected burgess would not have openly disagreed with her husband (and if she did Adam would have told us). This leads us to imagine that the girl's father, as well, supported his daughter. Remarkably, what is said is about him is barely enough to give the impression that the man was still alive at the time, but surprisingly scanty information considering he must have been present at court. In England at the time women, when involved in court proceedings, had to appear under the guardianship of a male representative. In this case it seems likely that the man chosen for this task was the girl's father, because the usual guardian of a married woman, her husband, was the matter in question. Adam's objective is clearly to justify Hugh's judgment. To include in the narrative the role played by girl's father, probably a respected member of the community, would have suggested that there were two plausible sides in this dispute, especially if the father was supporting his daughter in court, as his wife's behavior and his probable role as the girl's guardian indicate. The mother's support could be included in the narrative to the girl's disadvantage, by resorting to misogynistic language and stereotypes. The support of her father was harder to manipulate. Men were generally more respected, and in this particular instance the

girl's misbehavior is cast in strongly gendered terms that emphasize her femininity. The exclusion of the father, like the very limited attention given to the actual court proceedings, was a narrative choice made to strengthen Hugh's position.

No mention is made of how Oxford's burgher society reacted to the seemingly scandalous behavior of this young girl. In twelfth-century England open bigamy, or adultery, or husband desertion (or however one would choose to define the girl's behavior), would provoke outrage and condemnation, especially if the young woman came, as in this case, from a well-established middle class family. A hostile narrative like Adam's would hardly intentionally exclude mention of public disapproval, since it would only strengthen his case. It is equally improbable that, if Oxford society, in fact, disapproved of her domestic situation, the girl would have dared refuse to obey the bishop's ruling. It seems more likely that the town in which the young girl and her family lived in fact approved or at least accepted, her marital situation.

In the mid twelfth century, as mentioned above, canon law had far from reached its fixed and final formulation. Among the debates that were involving great theologians of the period such as Peter Lombard, the formulation of a definition of what constituted marriage was particularly problematic. The *Decretum*, published around 1140, had placed emphasis on mutual consent (*consensus*), followed by sexual consummation, as the two *conditiones sine quae non* to create a valid marriage.<sup>38</sup> Other theories were soon to challenge Gratian's position. Some considered *consensus*, expressed in the form of a promise, to be the only necessary element to create a marriage between marriageable persons. Others differentiated between a promise in *verba de presente*, a promise formulated in the present tense, that constitutes a marriage immediately, when the words were spoken, and a *verba de futuro* promise, a betrothal that

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<sup>38</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 236 and 243.



committed the two parties to a future marriage.<sup>39</sup> While a betrothal was considered a binding legal contract at the beginning of the twelfth century, a few years later some thinkers considered it revocable, and argued that the parties could mutually decide not to marry, in order to contract a marriage with other partners. Clearly the application of canon law was not a straightforward business. When Adam states that the man he calls “the husband,” “proved the charge” he is once again skipping over all of the legal proceedings. In the twelfth century a girl could hardly abandon her husband to live with her lover with the toleration and acceptance of the whole town. Something more complicated than what Adam was willing to admit seems to have taken place. The most likely interpretation of Adam’s silences is that some form of betrothal took place between the young girl and the first “husband,” a promise he considered binding, while the girl and her family thought no binding promise had been made and she was free to marry someone else. Hugh, in line with his portrait as an unyielding, determined man, leaned toward the strictest possible interpretation of canon law, and ruled in favour of the first man or “husband.”

Like other saints’ lives, the main purpose of this *Life* is “to depict Hugh as a saint.”<sup>40</sup> To this purpose Adam inserts at the end of the episode a “divine intervention” *topos*.

The bishop [...] immediately excommunicated her. She went home still stubborn and during that few days vouchsafed to her by the divine mercy to come to a better frame of mind, her heart became more hardened and not in the least repentant. Then being suddenly strangled by the devil, her illicit and temporary delights were exchanged for perpetual torments as she richly deserved.<sup>41</sup>

Of course we never will know if the girl did die suddenly after refusing to obey Hugh, but it is important to point out that Adam inserts this type of “divine intervention” ending more than once

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<sup>39</sup> Brundage, *Law*, 262-269.

<sup>40</sup> Antonia Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 130* (London:Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 314.

<sup>41</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*, 2:32.

in the *Life*. In at least one of these cases we know for certain from other sources that he is fabricating part of his story.

Adam clearly selected the material to include in his narration to achieve the main goal of the whole *Life*, to make Hugh a saint. But other reasons and considerations might have influenced his decision in this particular circumstance. Saints' lives were one of the few literary genres that young girls were encouraged to read. Female saints' lives were specifically aimed at a female audience, and usually included a number of literary *topoi* that served the double function of depicting the heroines as saints and providing a source of sexual education.<sup>42</sup> Medieval culture heavily condemned female sexuality. Women, as is well known, were perceived as sexually aggressive, and men were oftentimes perceived as victims of female aggressive sexuality. As Jerome phrased it "women's love in general is accused of ever being insatiable; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need; it enervates a man's mind, and engrosses all thought except for the passion which it feeds."<sup>43</sup> Saints' lives were one of the vehicles employed to teach young girls to negate sexual desire, to aim at a life, if not of celibacy, then at least of sexual moderation.<sup>44</sup> In this specific part of his work Adam could have been partially influenced by this type of literary motif. The young girl is cast almost as the exact opposite of the female saints that were role models for young medieval women. Both her representation as slave to her lust, as shown by the use of expressions such as "inflamed by a stronger love for another youth" and "illicit and temporary delights," and the choice of punishment: the "perpetual torments" that are "richly deserved," sound like a warning to Adam's female audience. The text is constructed on one hand to serve the general hagiographical intent

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<sup>42</sup>Vern L. Bulloagh, "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity," *The Journal of Sex Research* 13, no.3 (1977): 188.

<sup>43</sup>Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bulloagh and James Brundage (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 86.

<sup>44</sup>Bulloagh, "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity", 190.

of this type of literature, by giving an example of Hugh's efforts to uphold morality. But it might also have seized the occasion to pursue the sexual education of young women, an aim well suited to the material at hand.

### **Christina of Markyate**

The *Life of Christina of Markyate* is one of the most interesting medieval female saints' lives. It was composed by a monk of St. Alban whose identity remains unknown, but who seems to have been personally acquainted with Christina. Its history and composition have attracted considerable scholarly attention. The *Life* today survives in only one manuscript that was severely damaged by fire in the eighteenth century. The fire damage led historians to believe that the mid-sentence ending of the *Life* was due to the destruction of part of the manuscript until Rachel Koopmans argued very convincingly that the *Life* was, in truth, never completed.<sup>45</sup> Christina's *Life* technically is not a saint's life. It was composed during her lifetime and abandoned before her death. Important elements of the hagiographical genre, such as post mortem miracles, could not be included. Charles Hugh Talbot, author of the first translation of the *Life*, misled by his conviction that the work must have been completed, argued that its composition must have taken place c. 1155-1166, during the abbacy of Roger of St. Albans. Koopmans has argued that the *Life* was abandoned in 1146, or soon after, at the death of Abbot Geoffrey. Christina's *Life* was never completed because her association with St. Albans and her relationship with Abbot Geoffrey were far from widely accepted in the monastic community and in the society around it. As we shall see in more detail later on, Christina's behaviour, rather than

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<sup>45</sup> Rachel M. Koopmans, "The Conclusion of Christina of Markyate's *Vita*," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 51, no.4 (2000): 669.

unquestionably saintly, as the author of her *Life* would have us believe, was extremely controversial. Gossip mongers in town and in the monastery, as the *Life* tells us, were talking about her relationship with the abbot in less than favorable terms, and part of the community suspected their association to be sexual rather than spiritual in nature. In addition, Geoffrey lavished gifts, money, and favours on Christina. He founded the female religious community that she presided over, gave her very comfortable means of support from St. Alban's possessions, and made expensive gifts, notably the beautiful St. Albans psalter. Geoffrey followed Christina's financial advice and supported many religious communities, probably under her suggestion. These extravagances in favour of a woman of disreputable reputation upset part of the monastic community, and upon Geoffrey's sudden death in 1146 many of his charitable projects were abandoned, and Christina's *Life* was left uncompleted. No attempts to establish her cult were ever made; to the contrary, there is evidence that the monastery tried, mostly successfully, to eradicate the memory of the woman and of St. Alban's connection with her.<sup>46</sup>

This *Life* was composed in all probability at Abbot Geoffrey's instruction. The text was not revised or edited, thus many inaccuracies and omissions give away that the author frequently had problems adapting his material to the hagiographical nature of the text. The *Life* was commissioned with the intent to present Christina's character and life in the most saintly way possible, in conformity with the general tendency of medieval hagiographical writings. It was probably part of Abbot Geoffrey's great admiration toward Christina, and generally aimed at promoting her cult, of which a *Life* would have necessarily been the first step.

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<sup>46</sup> Rachel M. Koopmans, "The Conclusion," 696.

The *Life* of Christina, like the *Life of Saint. Hugh of Lincoln*, is a *unicum* in the medieval hagiographical scene. It has been praised as “unusually free from the conventional *topoi* found in hagiographical texts,” for example in the small number of miracles included.<sup>47</sup> The *Life* is a refreshingly straightforward narrative, indebted to both “the basic structures of saints’ lives of antiquity and to the newly awakened fascination with the vernacular romance, with its motifs of disguise and escape, the use of dialogue, and attention to dramatic detail.”<sup>48</sup> As Joan Tibbets Schulenburg points out, medieval saints’ lives are particularly rich in information that can be read “between the lines.” In the instances in which information is given, that is somehow extraneous to the general economy of the narration, scholars can glimpse areas of medieval lives that are usually hidden. The information is particularly trustworthy because it is not influenced by the inherent purpose of the text they are inserted into.<sup>49</sup> This is particularly true for the *Life* of Christina. In many instances the author presents us with extremely detailed pictures of the everyday life of a medieval girl.

Theodora (her original name) was born to a prosperous family in the town of Huntingdon some 30 years after the Conquest. According to her hagiographer she proved to be religiously precocious from her early years and her desire for a religious life crystallized when her parents took her on a visit to the monastery of St. Alban.

The girl looked at the place intently, and as she thought about the impressive perfection of the monks who lived there, she declared how blessed they were and how she wished to share in their fellowship [...]. The following day she went to church where the priest was celebrating mass. After the gospel Christina approached the altar and offered a penny, saying in her heart “O Lord God, merciful and all-powerful receive my oblation through the hand of thy priest. For to thee in surrender of myself I offer this penny. Deign to grant me, I beseech thee, purity and inviolable virginity, whereby I may renew the image of thy

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<sup>47</sup>H. C. Talbot, ed., *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): xxiii.

<sup>48</sup>Talbot, *Life*, xxiii.

<sup>49</sup>Talbot, *Life*, 302.

Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever Amen.”<sup>50</sup>

Years later Christina’s beauty attracted the attention of Ranulf, bishop of Durham and previous lover of Christina’s aunt. The author of the *Life* tells us that when he was spurned and outwitted by the girl, out of revenge he arranged her marriage to a wealthy young man named Beorhtred. Nancy Partner has argued that, “this bizarre explanation makes no sense, psychologically or socially.”<sup>51</sup> According to Partner, this interpretation of the events was inserted with a very specific purpose: to distract us (and more importantly his twelfth-century readers) from the fact that finding a wealthy husband for Theodora was “an act of friendship, generosity, and extreme good-will.”<sup>52</sup> Ranulf, like other characters in the *Life*, received a less than fair treatment from Christina’s hagiographer, undoubtedly because her past behaviour could be made to fit the parameters of the hagiographical genre only through heavy manipulation.

When Christina first refused the marriage and voiced her desire to preserve her virginity, her family mocked her. As her resolve did not waver, the pressures put on the young girl escalated. Her parents tried to win her over in every possible way, alternating the carrot and the stick, all to no avail. The author presents Christina’s parents in an extremely negative light, the more to stress Christina’s resolve and courage, in a highly biased way. Let us not forget that a considerable amount of his information on Christina’s early years came from her mother, who probably related it in a different way to the writer. The girl gave in to the combined pressures and agreed to the betrothal to Beorhtred, but still refused to celebrate the marriage or to

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<sup>50</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy F. Partner, “Christina of Markyate and Theodora of Huntingdon: Narrative Careers,” in *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*, ed. Robert M Stein (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 122.

<sup>52</sup> Partner, “Christina,” 123

consummate the union. In the following months Christina's parents tried to resort to legal action in order to persuade their stubborn daughter to give in to their wishes. Her father brought her to speak with Frederick, prior of the monastery which Christina used to frequent. The prior tried, unsuccessfully, to sway her determination in more than one occasion, resorting to canonical and legal arguments.<sup>53</sup> Christina was later made to face Bishop Robert, who, initially supportive of Christina, was bribed and persuaded to side with her parents.<sup>54</sup>

One interpretation of Christina's legal defense is that of Thomas Head. He argues, in "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," that her legal defense was based on a very unique perception of her status as *sponsa Christi*, and rested on a strict interpretation of canon law. What was absolutely peculiar to Christina's experience was the concrete and judicial value given to her status as bride of Christ.<sup>55</sup> The metaphorical use of the language of marital affection in a religious context was not new. It had been at the center of the Cistercian new piety that developed during the twelfth century, expressed, by Bernard of Clairvaux among others. The *Song of Songs* was a favorite source of images for this new piety, and the erotic images of the biblical text were coated in a highly symbolical interpretation and employed to express a "contemplative relationship where physical desire played little part."<sup>56</sup> But in the *Life* of Christina we encounter several instances in which the marriage between Christina and Christ is far from metaphorical. On one occasion Christina asked Beorhtred

"Tell me Beorhtred, and may God have mercy on you, if another man were to come and take me away from you and marry me, what would you do?" He replied, "I wouldn't put up with it for a moment as long as I lived. I would kill him with my own hands if there

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<sup>53</sup> Talbot, *Life*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Talbot, *Life*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Head, "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," in *Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth Century Holy Woman*, ed. Leyser Henrietta (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 118.

<sup>56</sup> Head, "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," 117.

were no other way of keeping you.” To this she replied “Beware then of wanting to take to yourself the bride of Christ, lest in his anger he slay you.”<sup>57</sup>

More interesting on this point is the manner in which Christina made her vow of virginity at the beginning of the *Life*. The gift of a denarius, used in betrothal ceremonies as a symbol for the bride’s dowry, the incision of a little cross on the church’s door, and the blessing from her friend the priest Sueno “set Christina’s vow apart for a simple vow of virginity and made it into a betrothal to Christ.”<sup>58</sup> On this argument rests the strength of Christina’s position. According to her perception, and, more importantly, according to her hagiographer, a betrothal constituted a binding legal contract. But this interpretation is not the only one that has been put forward by scholars. According to Partner, Christina’s defense rested on the validity of her vow, not on her status as *Sponsa Christi*. On this point it is necessary to point out that Christina took the veil and officially entered religious life only many years after these events, and only at Abbott Geoffrey’s insistence. The status of *Sponsa Christi* advocated for her by Head might more appropriately describe only those women who took vows and actually entered religious life, something that was probably not even on Christina’s mind at the time of her struggle with her parents. The difficulties in legally proving her betrothal invalid were due to the fact that, while the betrothal to Beorhtred had taken place with many witnesses and very publicity, the vow that Christina took was made silently; it was “invisible, inaudible, unverifiable.”<sup>59</sup> Even when later Sueno “confirms” the vow, this does not seem to imply that she took it again, this time out loud, in front of him, and the validity of the vow remains very questionable. To everyone around her the gift of the penny, that her hagiographer casts as “a token of surrender of her virginity to God,” was

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<sup>57</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Head, “The Marriages of Christina of Markyate,” 120.

<sup>59</sup> Partner, “Christina of Markyate and Theodora of Huntingdon,” 117.



merely a gift at the altar, and the “cross on the door frame” was simply made with her fingernail and probably not visible.<sup>60</sup>

In the legal struggle between Christina and her parents what partially plays out are the two different perceptions of marriage argued by Georges Duby in *Medieval Marriage*. Christina’s parents are still thinking about marriage with the mindset of family advantage. In this perspective marriages served primarily the purpose of continuing the family lineage and enhancing its social status, and were too important to be left to the individual decisions of those directly involved.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand the Church had been developing a radically different notion of marriage that would challenge and ultimately prevail over the aristocratic one. In defining what constituted a marriage, the stress was put not on sexual consummation, but on consensus and promise, in line with the increased ecclesiastical perception of marriage as a sacrament.<sup>62</sup> Christina’s hagiographer in all probability supported this clerical view of marriage, as did other clerics portrayed in the *Life*. According to this interpretation Christina’s engagement to Beorhtred was invalid because she was already bound by her vow of celibacy.

There are a number of observations that deserve to be made at the level of the text. First, it is necessary to point out that Christina’s *Life*, while it was composed by someone who was undoubtedly close to Christina, is not an autobiographical memoir. We must keep in mind that the views expressed in the text are not directly Christina’s own and that the narrative is in a considerable degree the expression of the author’s point of view. The male identity of the writer had an influence on his representation, one of the most interesting aspects of which is the gender transformation that Christina undergoes. After she consented to the betrothal, Christina refused

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<sup>60</sup> Partner, “Christina of Marcyate and Theodora of Huntingdon,” 117.

<sup>61</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, Chapter 1.

to consummate the marriage, and her resolve on the matter pushed her parents to resort to all kinds of psychological (and occasionally physical) abuse: “Since they had been outwitted in these plots they tried something else, and at night they let her betrothed secretly into her bedroom so that, should he find the maiden asleep, he might suddenly violate her.”<sup>63</sup> Canon lawyers did not agree—but, according to tradition, ‘folk’ opinion still believed, and Christina’s parents were no exception—that a betrothal promise followed by intercourse constituted a legal marriage. But that night Christina was wide awake, and welcomed Beorhtred in her bedroom, sat with him on the bed, and served him a night-long sermon on the virtues of chastity. Finally, she made this offer: “Do not feel shame that I have spurned you. So that your friends do not taunt you with having been rejected by me, I will go to your house and we will live there for a while ostensibly as husband and wife but in reality living chastely in the sight of the Lord.”<sup>64</sup>

Christina, or the anonymous author of the *Life*, knows that the main concern for Beorhtred is the scorn of his friends at being unable to seduce Christina. Her offer is planned to solve the threat to Beorhtred’s masculinity, but for him it was an unacceptable compromise. The episode continues:

When those that had gotten him into the room heard what had happened they joined together in calling him a spineless and useless fellow. With many reproaches they goaded him on again, and on another night thrust him forcefully into the bridal chamber, warning him neither to be misled by Christina’s deceitful tricks and naïve words, nor to let her *unman* him. He was to get his way either by force or entreaty, and if neither of these sufficed, he was to know that they were standing by to help him. He must remember to *act the man*. (my italics)<sup>65</sup>

Here starts the re-gendering of Christina’s resistance in male terms. Her ability to resist Beorhtred’s advances *unmans* him, making him less of a man. In this phase the masculine quality of Christina’s behaviour is formulated in passive terms, in her ability to “feminize” Beorhtred’s

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<sup>63</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 11

<sup>64</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 12

<sup>65</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 12.

sexual failures. He is failing as a man, as is made clear by the final reminder to *act the man*. Later in the narrative we shall see that her behavior is actively praised in masculine terms. The strength of Christina's determination is doubly challenging to Beorhtred's masculinity. Women were expected to be physically and spiritually weak. Adam, and all men with him, were associated with spiritual strength, but women were associated with materiality (they were made from Adam's flesh), and, according to Isidore of Seville, should therefore be "under the power of men because they are frequently spiritually fickle. Therefore they should be governed by the power of men."<sup>66</sup> Women are also associated with sexual greediness, and were typically perceived as more in the grip of sexual desire than men. Again in the words of Isidore: "the word *femina* comes from the Greek derived from the force of fire because her concupiscence is very passionate: women are more libidinous than men."<sup>67</sup> Resistance to temptation and strength of character are masculine qualities, not to be expected in a young girl, but Christina's resolve forces Beorhtred into an emasculating passive role. Medieval perceptions of sexuality were founded on the notion that "sexual intercourse was something that one person did to another."<sup>68</sup> Thus male superiority and agency were emphasized as expressions of the male active role, in contrast with female passivity.<sup>69</sup> As we have seen, Christina robs Beorhtred of his male agency, and assumes masculine characteristics later in the narrative. Christina's parents kept making preparations for her wedding, and kept hoping to eventually subdue their daughter, "for they hoped that an occasion would arise when she might be caught. For what woman do you suppose could avoid so many snares?"<sup>70</sup> This rhetorical question is not gender neutral; on the contrary, the author chose to emphasize both the sexual nature of the "snares" that Christina has to avoid, and

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<sup>66</sup> Isidore quoted from Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 85.

<sup>67</sup> Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 86

<sup>68</sup> Fenton, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury*, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 87.

<sup>70</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 13.

the fact that her success is doubly impressive, given her sex. The continued wedding preparations make Christina's closest friend, Sueno, a religious man, doubt her: "Thinking that she had changed her mind about her vow of virginity, he accused her of feminine inconsistency. [...] But now, while the young woman stood firm, the man faltered. Unexpectedly she was now abandoned and on her own in the midst of her enemies."<sup>71</sup> First, Sueno accuses Christina of *feminine* inconsistency, and, while this could be taken for no more than one of the usual medieval literary *topoi*, by adding in the following sentence that "the young woman stood firm, the man faltered," two contradictions are underlined. First, Christina, a young woman, is firm in her resolve, creating tension with the "female inconsistency" of the previous line. Second, there is a wonderful opposition between reality, the unwavering resolve of Christina and the unfaithfulness of her closest friend, and Sueno's mistaken perception that she has been inconsistent while he was keeping his resolve. Once again, the apparent simplicity of this text covers an underlining level of literary sophistication which has not always been appreciated by scholars.

The next phase in Christina's re-gendering starts after her successful escape from her parents. Rejected by Roger the hermit, who plainly refused to help a woman who had run away from her husband, Christina first stayed at Flamstead with a female anchoress, Ælfwynn, for two years. During that time her family kept searching for her, but she remained successfully hidden. Later Roger the hermit completely changed his attitude toward Christina and arranged for her to live with him. Christina's living conditions were extremely harsh. Her cell was minuscule, as to be better concealed, and she suffered from terrible sicknesses. It was during her time with Roger that Beorhtred finally decided to free her from her betrothal. After Roger's death, Christina had

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<sup>71</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 14.

to find somewhere else to live and here the story takes a slightly bizarre turn. She was hidden with a cleric, a friend of Archbishop Thurstan of York, in order to “avoid the anger of the bishop of Lincoln.”<sup>72</sup> That the bishop of Lincoln disapproved of Christina should put us on the alert regarding her reputation in the community. Clearly, her conduct was reproached at least as much as it was approved, and she most definitely did not enjoy a reputation of sainthood yet. Now the devil “took advantage of their close companionship and feeling of security to infiltrate himself stealthily and with guile, then later on, alas, to assault them more openly.”<sup>73</sup> But while the cleric is completely dominated by lust, exposing himself naked to the girl and trying to seduce her, although Christina “herself was struggling with this wretched passion, she wisely pretended that she was untouched by it. Whence he sometimes said that she was *more like a man than a woman, where she with her masculine qualities, might more justifiably have called him a woman.* (my italics)”<sup>74</sup> The author later adds, “would you like to know how manfully she behaved when she was in such great danger?”<sup>75</sup> Christina never gave in to temptation, nor to illness and incredibly difficult living conditions, and she finally found her place in a monastery where she lived for the rest of her life. Fenton has argued that in the twelfth century, as throughout antiquity, one of the defining characteristics of masculinity was restraint, the ability to master sexual urges.<sup>76</sup> Christina’s “maleness” is undoubtedly connected with her ability to restrain herself, both when facing Beorhtred and the unknown cleric.

What emerges of the author’s perception of Christina’s behaviour is of particular interest when compared with the young girl from Oxford. Both books were written by monks, and represent the monastic perception of both canon law and marriage regulation, and female

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<sup>72</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 46.

<sup>74</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 46

<sup>75</sup> Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 46.

<sup>76</sup> Fenton, *Gender, Nation, and Conquest*, 66.

“misbehaviour.” Both these women were extremely willful, and both are determined to follow their own desires. In the case of the young girl from Oxford, this means fighting for her right to choose, and stick with, the husband she loved. In the case of Christina we face an extraordinary medieval girl, determined to live her life according to her will and no one else’s. Regardless of social pressures to conform, by choosing either marriage or a regular monastic life, Christina “against convention and against the odds, made a life for herself following no institutional model and accepting no external supervision.”<sup>77</sup> There is little doubt that Adam of Eynsham considered the young girl of his story as “misbehaving.” This is made apparent not only by the actual events (for all the sympathy she can provoke in modern readers, she does spit in Church and disobey a bishop), but even more so in the narrative choices that I explained above. While Christina objectively misbehaves, refusing to obey her parents, disobeying not one but two bishops, and running away, she is positively portrayed by her would-be hagiographer. These two women embody the opposite perceptions of marriage. The young girl from Oxford and her family are still thinking of marriage in the terms of lay customary laws. Christina and her hagiographer are already reasoning in accord with the new regulations of canon law. Christina’s misbehaviour is praised in masculine terms, while the young girl from Oxford is criticized for her typically female weakness. Giving in to desire was perceived, in the clerical environment that produced both these texts, as a strongly “female” behaviour, while resistance and restraint were manly qualities. The willfulness of both these women is re-gendered according to the writers’ intention, negative in Adam’s narrative, positive in Christina’s, but it is never criticized *per se*.

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<sup>77</sup> Partner, “Christina of Markyate and Theodora of Huntingdon,” 128.

## Bertrade of Anjou

The story of how Bertrade of Anjou abandoned her husband Count Fulk of Anjou to marry Philip I, King of France, is one of the most frequently mentioned medieval “scandals,” at least in narratives of the time. Bertrade (1070 – 14 February 1117) married Fulk of Anjou in 1089, and by then Fulk had accumulated at least two, maybe three, living wives.<sup>78</sup> Her uncle obeyed his liege lord Robert Curthose Duke of Normandy, who desired to forge an alliance with Count Fulk for military aid, and agreed to her marriage in exchange for considerable lands. The story of Bertrade and Fulk’s marriage is a perfect example of that aristocratic notion of marriage that the Church started challenging at the beginning of the twelfth century. The freedom with which Fulk felt he could repudiate his wives is an expression of the feudal aristocracy’s conception of marriage. This vision privileged flexibility rather than indissolubility, so that powerful families could take advantage of marriage alliances to adapt to the always mutable political climate. While prior to the twelfth century the Church’s opposition to these matrimonial practices was more nominal than actual, from the twelfth century on feudal families started paying more heed to the Church’s admonitions. The Church “was inclined to interfere more and more in marriages. . . . It was no longer content, as it had been in Hincmar’s time, to give advice that risked being simply ignored; from now on it had no hesitation in baking up its beliefs with sanctions such as excommunication.”<sup>79</sup> Bertrade’s marriage to Fulk was thus very unstable from a legal point of view, and depended mostly on Fulk continuing to want only her as his wife. Like Adam of

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<sup>78</sup>Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, vol. 4 (Ox: Clarendon, 1980), 184, 186, 187n3.

<sup>79</sup> Philippe Aries, “The Indissoluble Marriage,” in *Western Sexuality*, ed. Philippe Aries (Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1985), 146.

Eynsham and the anonymous author of the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis and Abbot Suger represent the religious point of view on matrimonial practices, and thus harshly condemn the union of Bertrade with both Fulk and Philip.

Bertrade was unhappy in her first union and in 1092 left Fulk to elope with King Philip. At this point in the story the various accounts diverge. Most Angevin writers accord the agency to the king and narrate Bertrade's abduction at his hands. Other writers, and the ones I have chosen are among them, talk of a seduction carefully planned by Bertrade, who persuaded Philip to marry her. Bertrade and Philip had two sons, Philip and Florus, and regardless of several excommunications never truly separated. Orderic Vitalis and others have recounted how Bertrade tried to advance her own sons in the succession. Not only did she manage to acquire considerable lands for them, but she tried to undermine Louis, the king's first son, and arrange for one of her sons to succeed Philip as king. According to Orderic Vitalis, she even resorted to poison to try and kill Louis.

Of the many chronicles that mention these events, I chose to analyse the accounts that appear in the *Deeds of the English Kings*, written in 1125 by William of Malmesbury, the *Ecclesiastical History*, written by Orderic Vitalis between 1114 and 1141, and the *Deeds of Louis the Fat* by Suger, abbot of Saint Denis, composed from 1140 to 1144. These accounts, while having more than one difference, enjoy several similarities. The portrayals of the three main characters, Bertrade, King Philip, and Count Fulk of Anjou, share a common motif that sheds light on these authors' ideas of gendered "misbehaviour."



Orderic's is by far the most interesting account of Bertrade's story. While it most certainly seems to "belong more to romance than to history,"<sup>80</sup> it shares certain key aspects with other sources and presents a very compelling portrait of Bertrade. It is by far the most detailed, and also dedicates considerable attention to Bertrade's reasons for leaving her first husband. As I mentioned earlier, her marriage to Fulk of Anjou was unstable, and would not have been recognized as valid by the Church. These circumstances put Bertrade in a very precarious and difficult position:

About this time a disgraceful scandal begun in the kingdom of France. Bertrade, countess of Anjou, feared that her husband, might treat her as he had already treated two other wives, and that if she were deserted she would be despised by all like a low harlot. Being fully conscious of her high birth and beauty, she sent a loyal messenger to King Philip of France, to tell him what she had in mind; for she thought it better to desert her husband voluntarily and seek another than to be deserted by him and exposed to public scorn. The outcome was that the weak prince, learning of the wanton woman's desire, agreed to the crime and received her rapturously after she had fled her husband and fled to France. Then he separated from his highly born and pious wife, the daughter of the noble Florence duke of Frisia, who had borne him Louis and Constance, and took as his wife Bertrade, who had already lived for four years with Fulk of Anjou.<sup>81</sup>

William of Malmesbury states that Bertrade:

was enticed by the itch for a grander title to abandon [her husband Count Fulk of Anjou] and marry Philip, King of the French. The King, forgetting that 'Kingship and love make sorry bedfellows and sort but ill together', loved her with such passion that, while aiming at universal dominion himself, he was quite content to be dominated by her. In the end he became the object of general ridicule as a man besotted and was cut off by excommunication from the whole of Christendom, on account of his criminal passion, and this he put up with for several years.<sup>82</sup>

He later adds that Philip "grew tired of [his first marriage to Bertha daughter of Floris I, Count of Holland] because his wife was inordinately stout. He sent her away and contrary to law divine

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<sup>80</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 4, 262, note I.

<sup>81</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 4, 261.

<sup>82</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Deeds of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R A B Mynors and others, vol. 1 (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1998-1999), 439.

and human took the wife of the count of Anjou to live with him.”<sup>83</sup> Bertrade is mentioned one last time:

Philip, with advancing years was absorbed in lechery, and being deluded by the fair countess of Anjou, become the bond slave and plaything of adulterous passion. For this he was excommunicated by the Holy See; in any place he was staying, divine service was suspended, and on his departure the ringing of bells burst out everywhere. Whereat he gave vent to his folly in half-witted laughter: ‘do you hear, my fair one’ he said, ‘how they scare us away?’<sup>84</sup>

The *Deeds of Louis the Fat*, by Suger, was written to celebrate the kingship of Louis (1 December 1081 – 1 August 1137), the first son of Philip and Bertha. He was a good friend of Suger himself, who recounted his most important deeds in this work, dressing them in a fair amount of romanticism and exaggeration. Suger first mentions Bertrade and King Philip’s marriage in the first chapter of the *Deeds*: “two other sons, Philip and Florus, had been born of the irregular union to Countess Bertrada of Anjou.”<sup>85</sup> He later tells us that King Philip: “After his irregular union with the Countess of Anjou did nothing worthy of the royal majesty, for he was carried away by lust for the married woman he had carried off and gave himself over to gratifying his desires.”<sup>86</sup> Later, in reference to Bertrade’s son Philip, named after his father, Suger states that:

His mother wielded greater power than all of [ the other relatives of Louis]. A clever shrew, she had great skill in that amazing artifice women customarily use to trample boldly upon their husbands even after they have tormented them with abuse. She had so fully tamed her first husband, the Angevin, that he still venerated her as if she were his lady, even after he was totally rejected from the marriage bed. He often sat on a stool at her feet like someone under a spell, completely surrendering to her will.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Malmesbury, *Deeds*, 475.

<sup>84</sup> Malmesbury, *Deeds*, 733.

<sup>85</sup> Suger, *Deeds*, 27.

<sup>86</sup> Suger, *Deeds*, 61

<sup>87</sup> Suger, *Deeds*, 81.

The tone of these accounts could mislead readers into thinking that those expressed by Suger, William of Malmesbury, and Orderic Vitalis were the commonly shared sentiments at the time of the scandal. To the contrary, it seems likely that Philip's entourage at court was supportive of his decision. The fact that Louis had only one son could be dangerous in the event of Louis death. More importantly, among all the bishops of France, the only real opposition came from Ivo of Chartres, while the rest of the French clerical elite were indifferent if not supportive of the marital exploits of their king. The reformist tendencies that the Church adopted in this period were far from unanimously supported by the clerical elite. The reform started gaining momentum only as popes with reformist programs, starting with Gregory VII, were elected to the Holy See, but disinterest was still widespread in the European clergy.

Both the *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Deeds of the English Kings* assign the agency to Bertrade. While Orderic is more explicit, although less credible, William of Malmesbury only implies that the initiative came from Bertrade.<sup>88</sup> None of the writers is sympathetic to her. In the *Deeds of the English Kings* she is accused of desiring the marriage to the King only to gain a grander title than the one she already enjoyed, a display of raw ambition that is clearly disapproved. According to Orderic, she feared that her husband, Fulk of Anjou, would abandon her, and thus decided to precede him and leave him for a greater man. While of course we will never know exactly how reliable this information is, the short "psychological" description of Bertrade offered by Orderic displays not only his deep knowledge of human motive, but seems, if not true, then at least perfectly plausible. It also seems likely that the section on Bertrade's motives, specifically the idea that she could not trust her husband to remain with her, while plausible (considering the ease with which he had repudiated several wives before her), is

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<sup>88</sup> On the other hand most Angevin writers tend to place the emphasis on Philip's role in the abduction of the countess, rather than on her seduction of the king.

inserted to reiterate Orderic's negative opinion of Fulk. I do believe that any chance to further criticize the man would have proved too appealing to resist for the author of the *Ecclesiastical History*.

All three authors write very compelling descriptions of her personality, and all agree on her beauty, her seductiveness, and her persuasiveness. These qualities fit the parameters of female representation in medieval historical narratives. At least to some degree her portraits in these different narratives are all following the same pattern of literary representation. Bertrade makes use of the specifically female "weapons" of beauty and persuasiveness, the "great skill in that amazing artifice *women customarily use* to trample boldly upon their husbands even after they have tormented them with abuse. (my italics)"<sup>89</sup> Bertrade is thus described in the terms typically employed to describe female power. While Bertrade is fully in control of her situation, something that the three writers do not seem to approve, her male counterparts appear to be completely in her power. Philip's portrayal is generally consistent in the chronicles, which are unanimous in criticizing his weakness and his shameful compliance to the lady's desires: "Philip allows himself to be dominated by Bertrade, which turns upside down the usual roles of (dominant) male and (subordinate) female."<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, Suger's choice to emphasize Philip's weakness and passivity was part of his general attitude toward him. Throughout the *Deeds of Louis the Fat*, Philip is described as the opposite of his son, the real man of action. For Suger, Philip's indolence served to emphasize Louis's constant activity to defend the kingdom. The son is depicted as the opposite of his adulterous and idle father; what Philip neglected, Louis is always ready to right, in a constant display of kingly behavior.<sup>91</sup> Fulk of Anjou is also

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<sup>89</sup> Suger, *Deeds*, 81

<sup>90</sup> Fenton, *Gender, Nation, and Conquest*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> Suger, *Deeds*, ii

unanimously described as fully under Bertrade's spell, even more so after the end of their marriage. Once again, as in the story of Christina of Markyate, female control is achieved through a loss of male power and male sexual restraint. Both Philip and Fulk are deprived of their agency and of their authority, typical male attributes, by a woman who is represented not in male terms, as Christina was, but in *über*-female terms, by emphasizing her persuasiveness, beauty, lust, and desire for more power, in particular for her sons. This might be partially due to the fact that, while Christina was being described positively, Bertrade is harshly criticized, and the "honorary male" status granted to Christina was usually reserved for women who met the approval of the author.

The reasons for these writers' disapproval of Bertrade are complex. For instance, Orderic is generally critical of her use of poison, which appears in a different episode, and has a strong dislike for her first husband. Throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* Fulk is criticized for his "scandalous habits and pestilential vices."<sup>92</sup> When first writing about his marriage to Bertrade, Orderic was sympathetic toward the girl, handed over by her uncle to Fulk, who, at the time, had two, possibly three, living wives. Both Bertrade's marriages went against the prescriptions of canon law. The first, because it was not based on free consent, and because the groom was already bigamous; the second, because both spouses were already married. Orderic "accepted the rights of families and lords to arrange marriages in so far as they did not conflict with canon law."<sup>93</sup> Even if, at the time of the scandal, marital regulations were not as firmly established as they would be when Orderic was writing, "Orderic's attitude would probably have been much the same. The French bishop whose views were most familiar to him was Ivo of Chartres, [who] from the first refused to give approval to Philip's intended marriage unless the pope allowed

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<sup>92</sup>Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol.4, 187.

<sup>93</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1984), 128.

it.”<sup>94</sup> Orderic “was aware of the delicate interplay of politics and morals, and he confined himself on judicial rulings, giving support to the papal judgment against Philip in his union with Bertrade.”<sup>95</sup> Like Orderic, the two other authors who relate these stories were monks, and therefore they condemned a marriage that not only was an open challenge to the Church’s policy in matrimonial matters, but had been openly, and repeatedly, condemned by the pope.

## Conclusion

These three stories of women shed light on how matrimonial practices changed with the growing pre-eminence of canon law and with the Church’s development of a renewed legal regulation of marriage. First, the sources taken into consideration are an example of just how fast the acceptance of the new marriage regulations took place. The reform movement started in the mid eleventh century. By the first half of the twelfth century, the new matrimonial policy advocated by the Church was being applied in religious courts which had entire jurisdiction over marriage cases. For the time, it was a remarkably fast phenomenon. Historians have given various explanations for the speed in the adoption of these new regulations. Ivan Ermakoff has argued that the nobility itself started to rely on and take advantage of the new canon law for political reasons, using the Church’s regulations to their own advantage in order to pursue various matrimonial alliances. According to Ermakoff this was the determining factor, among other minor changes, that accelerated the widespread adoption of marriage canon law.<sup>96</sup> Philippe Aries has argued that while a specifically aristocratic set of values was at the core of the different notion of marriage upheld by high social classes, lower classes were more inclined to view

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<sup>94</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The World*, 129.

<sup>95</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The World*, 131

<sup>96</sup> Ivan Ermakoff, "Prelates and Princes: Aristocratic Marriages, Canon Law Prohibitions, and Shifts in Norms and Patterns of Domination," *American Sociological Review* 62, n.3 (1997): 15.

marriage in a way not dissimilar from the Church's own formulation. Rural communities prized *stabilitas* more than "fecundity or other considerations [...]. The basic principle was that one did not go back on one's word. One was not allowed to change one's plans, one's alliance, one's transactions too often and too quickly."<sup>97</sup> Monogamy and indissolubility might have been obstacles for the powerful, but they fit the rural mentality like a glove.

Canon law affected women's lives to a considerable degree, and not necessarily in a negative way. The insistence on *consensus* as the determining factor in the creation of a marriage increased the degree of freedom in the choice of partner granted to young girls, and forbade parents from forcing daughters into marriages against their will.<sup>98</sup> As we have seen in the episodes discussed above, women could, and did, express personal opinions in regard to the choice of their spouse. Bertrade of Anjou was part of the highest level of society and therefore enjoyed a lesser degree of freedom in her choices: "The unyielding gender constructions of medieval Europe stand out in high relief round aristocratic women. These persons who lived within the social umbrella of power and privilege, sustained in luxury by the labor of others, sharers in unearned honors, expected never to fight nor labor, look to us, (and perhaps themselves) the least powerful and most constricted of all medieval society."<sup>99</sup> Christina and the young girl from Oxford seemed to have been subject to strong pressures as well. In a society which prized parental approval, families had the opportunities to exert incredibly strong pressure

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<sup>97</sup> Philippe Aries, "The Indissoluble Marriage", in *Western Sexuality*, ed. Philippe Aries (Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1985), 149

<sup>98</sup> Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2001), 23. Michael M. Sheenan "Choice of Marriage Partner in the Middle Ages: Development and Mode of Application of a Theory of Marriage," in *Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household, and Children*, ed. Carol Neel (Toronto, University of Toronto Press: 2004). Frances and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York; Cambridge; Philadelphia: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 138.

<sup>99</sup> Nancy F. Partner, "The Family Romance of Guibert of Nogent : His Story, Her Story," in *Medieval Mothering*. Ed. John Carmi Parsons; Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: Garland Pub., 1996), 371.

on dependent children.<sup>100</sup> Canon law offered some protection from parental control. Christina's father, still reasoning in terms of traditional lay marriage, had no problem admitting to having forced his daughter into a marriage she did not want, but his was no longer entirely acceptable behaviour, as the rest of the story shows. Even though girls, and young men as well, expected their families to find suitable spouses for them and mostly did not object to the practice (probably content with a veto power over someone very unattractive), coercion was condemned by canon law. A few centuries later canon law still offered a young couple protection and freedom of choice, at least relatively. The case of Margery Paston, in fifteenth-century England, who fell in love and married her family's land agent, is a very good example. Regardless of the pressures and threats of her family who disapproved of the union for reasons of social status, she stuck to her beloved, and the bishop had no choice but to declare the marriage valid.<sup>101</sup>

The negative depictions of these women's demonstration of "independence" should not distract us from the fact that these women enjoyed a certain degree of control over their matrimonial future.<sup>102</sup> The authors' contempt for their behavior does not indicate a widespread dislike and disapproval of female independence. Christina's story is proof that, even in the monastic environment, there could be space for appreciation of female willfulness and strength of character if employed for religious purposes. Disapproval in the other two cases was connected not to a widespread perception of what female proper "behaviour" should have been in matrimonial matters, but to specific dislike for the actions of these women, and to the narrative purposes of the individual texts.

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<sup>100</sup> Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*, 24.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*, 27.

<sup>102</sup> "Independence" is here employed to indicate the limited and relative freedom to which medieval women could aspire.



The tones of this disapproval deserve mentioning. Criticism of female action is always expressed in gendered terms. Of the three episodes in question, the two women whose behaviour is described as “misbehaviour” are represented in expressly feminine terms. Adam of Eynsham stresses the lustfulness and stubbornness of the young girl, and on the “Herodias-like” attitude of her mother. Bertrade is equally characterized in all versions of the story as seductive, persuasive, lustful and deceitful, the typical negative qualities of female villains in the medieval imagination. Christina deserves the complete opposite treatment and is depicted as an “honorary male.” It seems as if a good woman might aspire to be male, but a bad woman must always remain female.

**“Mine Own Woman:”  
Widowhood and Female Autonomy**

*Shall no husband say unto me “Checkmate!”  
[Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde, II, 509]*

**Introduction**

Medieval widows have attracted a considerable degree of scholarly interest in the last few decades. Most works generally concerned with medieval women dedicate a section to widowhood, and numerous studies focusing on its legal, economic, and social aspects have been published.<sup>103</sup> The idea that widowhood was the life phase during which a medieval woman could enjoy a greater degree of freedom and autonomy has enjoyed steady support from the academic community. While some historians have recently demonstrated that married women were often involved in business and played a significant financial role, thus challenging the idea that they always lived in the shadow and under the control of their husbands, it is undeniable that widowhood offered many women new and exciting opportunities.<sup>104</sup> To take but one example, Peter Franklin has argued that peasant women were able to assume control of their lives at the death of their husbands: “arguing their own cases in courts, hiring labor, and cultivating and managing holdings successfully. In local politics ... they took up men's roles successfully and to as full an extent as they were allowed.”<sup>105</sup>

A woman’s legal status was fundamentally changed by the death of her husband. From a legal point of view married women enjoyed few opportunities for independent action, a situation

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<sup>103</sup> Sue Sheridan Walker, ed., *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). Luise Mirrer, ed., *Upon my Husband Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

<sup>104</sup> Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*, 84

<sup>105</sup> Peter Franklin, “Peasant Widows’ ‘Liberation’ and Remarriage before the Black Plague.” *Economic History Review* 39, no.2 (1986): 198.

reflected by the scarcity of married women who appear in legal records. The law reflected the secondary legal status of women. Jennifer Smith has noticed that: “the customs of Occitan cities, as we can presume do many other medieval law books, define and legitimate a system of male power structures, where laws concerning men are directed by men at men, and wherein women are truly exceptional.”<sup>106</sup> In England, “in common law the married couple were but one legal person and that one person was the husband. [...] Married women were *femes couvertes* and their husbands were both their sovereign and their guardians.”<sup>107</sup> They gained possession of a wife’s chattels when the couple married, and administered the land that constituted her dowry. Wives had a veto power over the alienation of dowry land, but no more. The alienation from most areas of litigation due to their legal subordination to their husbands is probably the reason that the vast majority of women found in legal records are involved in litigation over land, often their dowry.<sup>108</sup> Smith noticed that Occitan law codes, in the few instances in which they are directed at women directly, define women according to their relation to a male relative. Women were categorized as wives, daughters, and widows, while men were simply men. In addition, “the status of a woman is dependent on the position of her nearest associated male.”<sup>109</sup> The secondary importance of women in the eyes of Occitan law was reflected by the very limited areas of legal agency to which women were entitled. Women could, for example, make wills, but within certain limitations. Married women without children were required parental consent, and so were unmarried daughters. In conclusion, “women appear to be little understood as individuals within the law, and function only within limited areas in which they are secondary to a more powerful

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<sup>106</sup>Jennifer Smith, “Unfamiliar Territory: Women, Land and Law in Occitania, 1130-1250,” in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noel J. Menuge (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>107</sup>Emma Hawkes, “[S]he Will ... Protect and Defend her Rights Boldly by Law and Reason ...”: Women’s Knowledge of Common Law and Equity Courts in Late-Medieval England,” in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noel J. Menuge (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000), 146.

<sup>108</sup> Hawkes, “She Will,” 152

<sup>109</sup> Smith, “Unfamiliar Territory,” 28

man.”<sup>110</sup> A very similar concept is echoed by Emma Hawkes in relation to England: “[married] women had very little opportunities to establish separate legal identities and statuses. Their legal actions were invariably made in conjunction with their husbands.”<sup>111</sup>

But, “common lawyers, and to an extent canon lawyers, agreed that in the eyes of the law husband and wife (*baron* and *feme*) were one person and that person was the husband. [...] A widow might have been bereaved and vulnerable, but legally she was at her most competent: she had full legal power.”<sup>112</sup> This accounts for the fact that widows make significantly more appearances than married women in sources such as court records. But even though from a legal point of view it would seem women gained from the death of their spouse, it was not always so from an economic point of view. Many studies have investigated the financial provision made for widows.<sup>113</sup> At the death of her husband a woman was entitled to her dower, estimated at a third of her husband’s possessions, and in some instances to a *legitim*, a portion of his movable goods, or chattels, although this last measure was infrequently applied.<sup>114</sup> Husbands could also make specific bequests to their wives by writing a will. But if *de iure* a medieval widow was well provided for, *de facto* heirs were often reluctant to hand over the dower, forcing widows to appeal to the law. The frequency of dower litigation cases has been noted by several historians.<sup>115</sup> Dower litigation was the only instance in which a woman could act on her own in court, without having to be represented by a lawyer or male relative, although many still

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<sup>110</sup> Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 34.

<sup>111</sup> Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law*, 153

<sup>112</sup> Sue Sheridan Walker, “Introduction,” in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>113</sup> Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (Phoenix Press: London, 1996). Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*, Sue Sheridan Walker, ed., *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*.

<sup>114</sup> Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*. 85 Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*, 171. Sue Sheridan Walker, ed., *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. 83

preferred to do so. A considerable amount of these cases were decided in favor of the widow, but many were not, especially if the defendant was the Church, a fact maybe connected with the Church's legal expertise.

An interesting category of women who acquired considerable financial independence at the death of their husbands is that of the "serial" aristocratic widow described by Rowena E. Archer in "Rich Old Ladies: the Problem of Dowagers in Late Medieval England."<sup>116</sup> These women were in charge of their land and household, but also had to face the danger represented by familiar and royal interference in their future. The loathed practice of the king to dispose of rich widows in marriages to his benefit is well documented, and the pressure of relatives, in-laws and guardians was just as burdensome.

Social status was a fundamental variable in the changes in medieval women's lives that could occur with widowhood. A middle class woman living in a town would have faced different challenges than a lady of the feudal aristocracy or a peasant. The widow of a merchant or artisan would have had to make a living, usually by taking over the work of her dead spouse. The frequency of this type of arrangement demonstrates how women regularly played key economic roles, and how sometimes they were even expected to take over what would normally be considered "men's" business.<sup>117</sup> Work was not always a welcome opportunity for medieval women. It was not unusual for a widow to wish to sell her husband's business and retire, but this was not always a feasible option. A noble lady could rely on a landed dower and thus be free from financial worries, but with land and wealth came suitors and pressures to remarry that were difficult to resist. Peasant widows have attracted considerable attention. I have already

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<sup>116</sup> Rowena E. Archer, "Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Dowagers in Late Medieval England," in T. Pollard, *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History* (Gloucester : A. Sutton , 1984)

<sup>117</sup> Leyser, *Medieval Women*, 179-180.

mentioned Franklin's interesting work on the economic and public roles they could assume, and other scholars have investigated the possibilities that opened up to them.<sup>118</sup> Aristocratic widows were not the only ones who could be pressured into remarriage. Peasant widows could find themselves in the same situation, even when they enjoyed full economic independence. In communities in which land was not easily available, widows tended to marry young landless men, in order to redistribute the available wealth. But the availability of land was not the only factor that could influence a widow's decision to remarry or remain independent. Apart from personal preferences, the attitude of the community to single autonomous women played a fundamental role. Where widows in charge of their land and household were better tolerated, remarriages were less frequent, even if land was scarce in the area. In more "conservative" communities, widows might have preferred to marry again even if there was no lack of land for young unmarried men.<sup>119</sup>

The medieval Church was ambivalent toward the remarriage of widows. The Church, while it did not forbid remarriage, ruled that the second marriages of widows and widowers should not receive the nuptial blessing. Discouraging second marriages was justified in theological and moral terms, as the Church praised widows who decided to embrace a life of celibacy and considered them morally superior to married women. But widows were often forced by economic circumstances to remarry, whether they wanted to or not, and the Church had to cope with this social reality. As James Brundage has phrased it: "the result was an intellectually

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<sup>118</sup> Judith M. Bennett, "Widows in the Medieval English Countryside," in *Upon my Husband's Death*, ed., Luise Mirrer, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

<sup>119</sup> Lori A. Gates, "Widows, Property, and Remarriage: Lessons from Glastonbury's Deverill Manors," in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 28, no. 1 (1996): 19-35.

untidy and practically unworkable patchwork. On the one hand, churchmen told widows that they could remarry, but they also told them that they should not.”<sup>120</sup>

With all of the difficulties that widows had to overcome, widowhood could bestow on medieval women the opportunity to fend for themselves and be more autonomous. Through the examples of Guibert of Nogent’s mother, the wife of Walter of Vladslo, and Agnes, the wife of Thomas of Saleby, I will argue that it was not uncommon for women to take considerable risks in order to preserve their independence. This is of course not necessarily true for all medieval women, but the actions of these specific “misbehaving” widows do argue for the existence of a not uncommon desire to take advantage of the opportunities widowhood could offer. These women, with the exception of Guibert’s mother, are described with more or less severity as misbehaving. Feudal society perceived widows as a threat to its system, which was founded on the preservation of the lineage and its wealth through the right of primogeniture. Widows could hinder their natal families by contracting a second marriage that went against the family interests, or by trying to secure an inheritance for children born of a second husband. They could simply live for a very long time, thus alienating their dower from the lands of the family for a considerable amount of time. The typical negative representation of stepmothers and widows stemmed from this perceived threat to the social system. The authors whose works I will take into consideration were conscious of this social reality, and were consequently influenced by the rhetoric it inspired in medieval literature. But, as usual, widespread cultural and literary *topoi* are more the means than the causes behind descriptions of female misbehaviour. As we shall see, the degree of criticism of each author is connected to individual narrative objectives more than passive subservience to cultural trends.

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<sup>120</sup> James A. Brundage, “Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and their Resolution in Classical Canon Law,” in *Wife and Widow*, 25.

The episodes I will discuss give us the opportunity to see how far medieval women were willing to go in order to secure their autonomy. Two of them have in common the very peculiar theme of “swapped” babies, and all three present portraits of medieval widows whose determination to be autonomous is extraordinary.

### **The Widow of Walter of Vladslo**

*The Murder of Charles the Good* was composed by Galbert of Bruges following the murder of the count of Flanders in 1127. The many repetitions, discordances, and little inaccuracies in the narration illustrate that the chronicle was composed at the same time as, and shortly after, the events narrated. Galbert’s perception and reactions, many undiluted by time and reflection, are ripe with fresh anger and indignation. The chronicle is structured as a journal, the only one we have from Europe in the twelfth century, and the events are narrated day by day in a highly captivating way.<sup>121</sup> The unusual format is not the only characteristic setting it apart from other historical works of the time. Galbert wrote with a specific audience in mind: “his fellow townspeople of Bruges, rather than the learned, well-read, Latinate, largely ecclesiastical audience for whom histories and saints’ lives were normally written at the time.”<sup>122</sup> While Galbert was certainly a well-educated cleric, he was not part of the monastic ecclesiastical environment in which most of the twelfth century literature was written. Rather, he was a functionary in the count’s administration and a townsman of Bruges.

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<sup>121</sup> Jeff Rider and Alan V. Murray, “Introduction,” in *Galbert of Bruges and the Historiography of Medieval Flanders*, ed. Jeff Rider and Alan V. Murray (The Catholic University of America Press: Washington D.C., 2009), 2.

<sup>122</sup> Jeff Rider and Alan V. Murray, “Introduction,” 2.



The murderers of the count of Flanders had hoped that their crime would go unpunished and that the rest of the nobility and the townspeople of Burges, faced with a *fait accompli*, would desist from seeking revenge for the death of Charles the Good and accept the situation. They had not expected the violent reaction of the people of Burges and of those members of the aristocracy who remained loyal to Charles. Barricaded in the church where the murder took place, they were eventually forced to surrender and brutally executed. Others allies of Bertulf, the provost and the chief instigator of the murder, were hunted down and killed by Charles' avengers.

In the September 17<sup>th</sup> entry Galbert writes of God's punishment of Walter of Vladslo. Walter was a nobleman who had sided with the murderers, sealing his political alliance by giving his first-born son in marriage to a niece of Charles's archenemy, Bertulf, the provost.

Vladslo was hurled from his horse by its motion while he was on a certain knightly expedition and died after languishing for a few days in shattered condition. It was certainly true that he had been accessory to the betrayal of his lord, the father of the whole land of Flanders. In order to stand in with the traitors in the most binding way possible he had even married off one of Bertulf's nieces, to a certain adopted boy, actually the son of a cobbler whom his wife had passed off as his own.<sup>123</sup>

Galbert goes on to tell us the whole story, and we learn that Vladslo's wife had passed off the cobbler's son as her own when her own child died at birth. She paid money to the cobbler and pretended for many years that the boy was her own. Her husband had no idea that his heir was not, in fact, his son. But "[n]ow, after the death of Walter, his wife announced publicly that the boy was an adopted son and not his real son."<sup>124</sup>

In the text nothing is said, even once, about this woman's reasons for acting so exceptionally. I think it is safe to assume that Walter's wife had been under great pressure, enough to push her to a desperate act. Walter was no sympathetic man; to the contrary, he sounds

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<sup>123</sup> Galbert de Bruges, *The Murder of Charles the Good*, trans by James Bruce Ross (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 262.

<sup>124</sup> Galbert de Bruges, *The Murder*, 262.

quite disagreeable, violent, and extremely ambitious. It is not farfetched to imagine that his wife must have felt that she had to “secure the male heir so necessary for every landed family.”<sup>125</sup> Failure to do so could have jeopardized her social and personal status and even her security in the marriage. As Martina Hacker has noted, “the dynastic code obliged a nobleman to give an heir to his family and vassals. The failure to provide an heir, that is, childlessness, was in medieval times almost invariably blamed on the woman.”<sup>126</sup> We should not forget that in the twelfth century, even though the Church was actively preaching indissolubility and monogamy (and excommunicating kings for not obeying canon law), many aristocratic families felt that they could quite freely dispose of wives, especially those who were barren, as we have seen in the case of Fulk of Anjou, and many minor feudal families could escape the Church’s notice or simply disregard its ruling without fearing consequences.

Walter of Vladslo’s wife in particular seems to have regarded her situation as demanding extraordinary measures; not willing to risk her position, she found a child to pass off as her own. Perhaps Walter’s wife felt the need to be a mother to mark her own identity as a social adult. The extremes to which she was willing to go indicate that she was trying to solve an extreme problem. This could have been personal, the need for fulfilment, or connected with outside forces, such as a jeopardized marital status.

The “misbehaviour” of the women does not end with the swapping of babies. She later revealed what she has done “publicly,” announcing to the community the illicit status of her first-born. In doing so she disinherited him, a serious and hostile act. Martina Hacker has argued that the account is not credible on the grounds that Walter’s wife lacked “any apparent reason to such

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<sup>125</sup> Nancy F. Partner, “Galbert’s Hidden Women: Social Presence and Narrative Concealment,” in *Galbert of Bruges and the Historiography of Medieval Flanders*, 121

<sup>126</sup> Martina Hacker, “The Language of Misogyny in Galbert of Burges’s Account of the Murder of Charles the Good,” in *Galbert of Bruges and the Historiography of Medieval Flanders*, 129.

a post-mortem confession.”<sup>127</sup> In Hacker’s opinion, this was a manoeuvre of the Erembald clan to secure Walter’s inheritance. Regardless, it seems likely that the woman felt threatened by the connection with the Erembalds created by the marriage of her bastard son. Galbert repeatedly makes clear that marrying off his nieces was the provost Bertulf’s chief tool to secure politically advantageous alliances; in this he was not different from many other aristocratic families. In this case, both parties had seen in the marriage as a way of advancement, but neither had foreseen the manhunt that would begin after the murder of Charles. Many of the provost’s supporters were being brutally executed, and the political situation in Bruges and the surrounding area was clearly turning against the rebellious faction. A family connection with the provost was no longer very desirable. To the contrary; it could jeopardize the woman’s personal and economical safety, especially since she no longer enjoyed the protection of her husband and his men.

If this woman is as intelligent as she appears (after all she succeeded in passing off a cobbler’s son as her own under the nose of her husband) the effects of her actions might have been calculated to serve her purposes. It is possible that she welcomed the independence of her new status. As a widow she now had control over her wealth and was the guardian of her other unmarried son, who was still young. Ellen E. Kittel has dedicated remarkable attention to the topic of guardianship over women in medieval Flanders.<sup>128</sup> Her conclusions support my thesis that Walter’s wife had nothing to lose and everything to gain, in terms of autonomy and independence, from disinheriting her first son. According to Kittel, guardianship over women was far from a widespread practice in medieval Flanders. To the contrary, women enjoyed the possibility of administering their wealth independently and without male supervision. In Kittel’s words: “the lack of legal texts specifically addressing guardianship over women simply reflects

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<sup>127</sup> Hacker, “The Language”, 135.

<sup>128</sup> Ellen E. Kittel, “Guardianship Over Women in Medieval Flanders: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 4 (1998): 897-930.

the absence of any such systematic practice. ... Men were not economically responsible for women, but also, they did not have to act for them in public.”<sup>129</sup> Even when women employed a procurator, he was solely responsible for representing them in person, but the agency rested always with the women. Occasional cases of guardianship did, of course, exist, especially in cases involving land held in feudal tenure, but most widows inherited directly from their husbands and were considered the natural heir.<sup>130</sup> If one of the parents was deceased and there were minor heirs, guardianship was given to the surviving spouse.<sup>131</sup> A widow with young children was thus their guardian and was in custody of their goods and lands. It is clear then that by disinheriting her first born this woman increased her economic and personal independence. Her older son was of age, and thus excluded from her guardianship. Anything inherited by him would have been permanently out of his mother’s control. But by disinheriting him she made sure that everything was left either to herself or her other son, who was still underage and would have naturally been put in her guardianship. One way or the other, she would have been in charge of part or all of her late husband’s possessions, and free to live her life in any way she chose. She would have acquired as much independence to which a medieval woman could aspire: in control of herself, her land, and her son, she could decide if she would rather remarry (and wealthy as she was she would have attracted many offers) or remain a widow. She wanted safety from the avengers of Charles, but in the long run she might have foreseen the possibility of achieving an independence more easily granted to widows in control of their fortunes. Unlike England, in Flanders widows were not subjected to comital control. Walter’s widow was free from political pressures to remarry, and, by rescinding her ties with the provost’s family, less subjected to familial pressures. We can trace the trajectory of this woman’s social self, from the

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<sup>129</sup> Kittel, “Guardianship,” 900

<sup>130</sup> Kittel, “Guardianship,” 911

<sup>131</sup> Kittel, “Guardianship,” 911-912-

extreme need for motherhood, that led her to the extreme decision of taking some else's baby as her own, to the later fear and desire for safety and, perhaps, freedom.

The judgemental and moralistic tones we might expect from, say, Adam of Eynsham are mostly absent, with few exceptions. Galbert's commonplace misogyny has been noted. Nancy Partner has argued that, "the routine conventions of patriarchal society, some misogynist stereotypes, areas of moral blindness and uninspected prejudices - are all still there."<sup>132</sup> Hacker has noted that Galbert "in his reports of events he has not witnessed ... prefers the versions that show the woman in an unfavourable light,"<sup>133</sup> and that in his narrative he "abuses women to demonstrate God's omnipotence."<sup>134</sup> But while Galbert does not completely escape medieval stereotypical misogyny, he also does not indulge in it as much as other ecclesiastical writers. The behaviour of this woman is clearly not applauded, but Galbert is not over-concerned with the moral aspects of this episode. Even though he does not approve of her, he does not openly criticize her either.

This episode, like every other part of Galbert's story, was included for a specific reason. Galbert "does not simply record the events of 1127 and 1128, but tries to present history as the working of God."<sup>135</sup> He is not mysterious about his personal political inclinations. It is made clear throughout the narration that he despises the traitors and desires nothing more than their death and humiliation. In telling this episode he has the occasion to show how God "punishes present and earlier sin."<sup>136</sup> The provost's plan to better his social status through this marriage backfires. He can also malignantly rejoice at the complete humiliation of the provost "who, when he wanted to exalt his family proudly and arrogantly by that marriage, joined it to the son of a

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<sup>132</sup> Partner, "Galbert's Hidden Women," 113.

<sup>133</sup> Hacker, "The Language of Misogyny," 144.

<sup>134</sup> Hacker, "The Language of Misogyny," 144.

<sup>135</sup> Hacker, "The Language of Misogyny," 137

<sup>136</sup> Hacker, "The Language of Misogyny," 137.

cobbler.”<sup>137</sup> Galbert is positively thrilled with the situation, and the episode is included to add to the already quite complete degradation of the provost. It is fortunate for, otherwise, nothing might have been recorded of the misbehaviour of this courageous wife.

### **Agnes of Saleby**

The second source is also found in the *Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln*. In Book IV ch. 5 Adam inserts the interesting story of a woman who was married to a sickly and weak man, who seemed close to dying. From legal records we know that the man was a knight, Thomas of Saleby, and his wife’s name was Agnes. Because they were childless, the land of the husband was going to be inherited by his brother, in accordance with the law, but Agnes:

Disliked the brother, and having never concealed her feelings, feared that if she were left a widow *he would be her guardian*. Having no child of her own, with serpentine guile and wickedness she passed off another child as hers, in order to shut him out of the inheritance. ( my italics)<sup>138</sup>

The story is told in great detail. Agnes secured the child of another woman, tied a pillow on her belly and for months pretended to be pregnant. Despite her brother-in-law’s suspicions Agnes:

Took to her bed, and groaned as if she were in travail. She produced a newborn female infant which she had procured from a women in a village in the neighbourhood, and brought it up with as much care as if it had been really her own.<sup>139</sup>

The brother shared his suspicions with the bishop, and Hugh, outraged, summoned the husband and elicited a confession, the man “fearing the scolding of his shameless wife more than the wrath of God, and ensnared by her crafty tongue, at first denied his complicity in the crime.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Hacker, “The Language of Misogyny,” 137.

<sup>138</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *The Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln*, 20.

<sup>139</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life*, 20.

<sup>140</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life*,. 21

Thomas later stated that he was ignorant of his wife's plan and needed to hear the truth from her. When he went home and told her about the conversation with the bishop, she abused him verbally. The following day the couple was excommunicated in Church. But there were more dramatic turns of event waiting: "Satan [...] on the following night suddenly claimed and seized the soul of the man who had connived at his wife wickedness."<sup>141</sup> Agnes kept up the deception regardless of the bishop's opposition and the brother in law's accusations.

This story is far more detailed than the one recounted by Galbert, and offers many instances for analysis. Agnes's motives are stated by Adam himself: she did not want to be under the guardianship of her brother-in-law. She craved independence, having perhaps enjoyed an unusual degree of freedom even as a married woman, given the seemingly weak character of her husband. It appears from the text that she was in full control of her household and of her spouse, being able to persuade him to endure excommunication and a very unpleasant scolding from the bishop. This is a woman accustomed to making her own choices, and as the death of her husband approached, she might have dreaded a change in her situation. Being a widow without means and under the guardianship of male relatives could prove to be a loathsome situation. Widows received a dower calculated at a third, if not a half, of their husband's possessions, but heirs often tried to avoid paying the dower, as proved by the high number of dower claims found in legal records. Widows often could reach an agreement with the heir and be given an annuity instead of their dower, a situation of actual dependence that most seem to have disliked. In the words of Peter Fleming: "needless to say the widow often found the annuity less satisfactory [than the granting of her dower lands] since it put her at the mercy of the party from whom she received

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<sup>141</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life*, 21.

it.”<sup>142</sup> Agnes could have been dreading a situation of economic dependence, such as an annuity from the brother-in-law, a less than welcome change in her situation. She also could have feared a situation of *de facto* legal dependence. This couple was part of the feudal aristocracy, even if not her husband’s heir, Agnes would have inherited her dower, a third of her spouse’s lands, and maybe a third of his chattels, her *legitim*. Her wealth might have made her an appetizing prize for one of the many landless men who hoped for nothing better than to find themselves a landowning wife. English kings had a habit of granting widows to their supporters or of asking fines to permit a widow to choose her own husband. This practice was so loathed by his barons that at Runnymede King John was forced to make concessions on this matter, limiting the crown’s power over widows’ remarriages.<sup>143</sup> Widows did not need legal guardians as minors did, but they were still subjected to the pressures of their families. In the aristocracy, the autonomy of widows was perceived as a threat to the feudal system. According to Noel James Menuge, “the putative autonomy of the heiress [or widow] puts feudal/patriarchal authority under pressure because of her ability to marry an unsuitable person.”<sup>144</sup> The widow’s lands would pass into the administration of her new husband, who was thus required to swear fealty to the widow’s lord. But it would have been problematic if the man chosen was an enemy, whose oath the lord was forced to accept. Families and in-laws would try and control the widow’s choice to orient it towards an acceptable candidate. This practice is yet another aspect of the aristocratic model of marriage that was founded on the principle of preserving the family and its lands from one generation to the next. If a widow decided not to remarry, she could very effectively alienate a considerable portion of the family lands for one or more generations.<sup>145</sup> Canon law had

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<sup>142</sup> Fleming, *Family and Household*, 89.

<sup>143</sup> Fleming, *Family and Household*, 91

<sup>144</sup> Noel James Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship in Romance and Law* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 83

<sup>145</sup> Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 92



established in the twelfth century that a widow could not be forced into remarriage, but family pressure could easily border on coercion, thus limiting a widow's autonomy considerably.<sup>146</sup> The wealthier the widow, the more the family was likely to be heavily involved in her future. Agnes probably feared she might not have been able to resist the pressures of her in-laws.<sup>147</sup>

Whether this woman feared economic or legal dependence on her brother-in-law makes little difference to my argument. What remains clear is that she feared and disliked the idea of his interference with her life. The chosen solution to this problem was the faked pregnancy. By giving her dead husband a child, the woman managed to cheat her brother-in-law of the inheritance, thus severing the legal and economic ties that would have bound her to him. In addition to this, she might have hoped to become the guardian of their daughter. In England, it was frequent for someone other than the mother to be granted the guardianship of heirs and heiress during their minority. As Sue Sheridan Walker has argued: "there were two ways that mothers could indeed secure the custody of their children: by retaining the *de facto* control of the child at the guardian's discretion, or by buying or receiving the guardianship of the heir from the feudal overlord who had the right of custody."<sup>148</sup> In this case the mother seems to have maintained *de facto* custody, but her daughter was betrothed and "the child and her lands were given by the king to a certain youth, the brother of Hugh de Neville, the chief forester of the kingdom."<sup>149</sup> Agnes was freed from her brother-in-law and any interference on his part that she might have been dreading. The marriage of the child, Grace, was celebrated while Hugh was abroad:

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<sup>146</sup> Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 99

<sup>147</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, trans. Paul Archambault. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.

<sup>148</sup> Sue Sheridan Walker, "Widow and Ward: the Feudal Law of Child Custody in Medieval England." *Feminist Studies* 3, no.3/4 (1976), 108.

<sup>149</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 23.

Although she was not four years old [her betrothed] decided that their marriage should be solemnly celebrated, fearing that something might prevent his acquisition of her inheritance. When this was reported to the bishop, as he had frequently issued constitutions forbidding the marriage of those who had not yet reached the years of discretion, he now gave a special order forbidding any priest or devout Christian to be present at the wedding.<sup>150</sup>

Already by 1140, the Church had started enforcing regulations that forbade the marriage of children under the age of consent: “In order to marry the parties had to be of marriageable age, had to be legally able to contract marriage (i.e. free of impediments such as consanguinity) and had to be able to give their free consent to the union without being subject to undue ‘force and fear’.”<sup>151</sup> The age of consent was established at twelve for girls and fourteen for boys, but, as documented by Menugue, the practice of forcing minors into marriages was common enough among parents and guardians, regardless of the Church’s policy. According to Adam, Hugh had been active in trying to discourage this practice, and would probably have succeeded in preventing this marriage from taking place, had it not occurred in his absence.

After the marriage Agnes “came at last to her senses, and began to feel misgivings about the horrible sin she had committed.”<sup>152</sup> After her confession, the bishop lifted her sentence of excommunication. From this point on in the narrative the main “villain” becomes Adam de Neville, the girl’s husband, who is made to suffer an unexpected death: “he went joyously to bed somewhat intoxicated and died unexpectedly in his sleep, and alone and unprepared, for he had expected nothing of the kind, appeared before the tribunal of a more impartial judge to receive retribution for his crimes.”<sup>153</sup> It is in precisely this instance that we know from other sources that, in fact, he was alive for at least seven years after these events (the case against Agnes is from 1194; Adam died in 1201).

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<sup>150</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 24

<sup>151</sup> Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 86

<sup>152</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 25

<sup>153</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 26

On a textual level it is important to note that this episode shares several similarities with the young girl from Oxford. In each case, Adam uses an example of Hugh's judicial work, and, in each case, his ruling is not respected. To solve the narrative problem posed by the challenge to Hugh's authority, Adam inserts a fictional ending in which the "villain" dies suddenly and has to face God's judgement without having had an occasion to repent. In this way Adam strongly presents Hugh's ruling as in accord with God's, thus strengthening his "sainthood." It is also important to note that, in both these episodes, we have negative representations of women that rest strongly on typical misogynistic notions. In Agnes case we are first told that "with serpentine guile and wickedness she passed off someone else's child as her own,"<sup>154</sup> and later Adam mentions that her husband was "ensnared by her crafty tongue"<sup>155</sup> and that "reluctantly yielding to his tyrant, whom contrary to the order of nature he had long been accustomed to obey, he stayed at home and added the sin of deceit to his former error."<sup>156</sup> Last but not least Adam adds: "Let it be a lesson to those who are led into crime and sin by the weaker sex which should be subject to them, and are not forewarned by the example of our first parent, whose wife, beguiled by the serpent brought upon him and his descendants the awful fate of exile from Paradise, and death."<sup>157</sup> On the one hand, Agnes is depicted, not very differently from Bertrade of Anjou, as persuasive and unnaturally in control of her husband. Once again female autonomy and control is achieved, textually and factually, through a loss of male agency. Instead of being masculinized by her control, though, Agnes is a negative *über*-female character, like Bertrade. While in the episode of the young girl from Oxford Adam was more subtle, at least by medieval standards, in his employment of misogynist literary *topoi*, in this case he does not hold back. His references to

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<sup>154</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 20

<sup>155</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 21

<sup>156</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 22.

<sup>157</sup> Adam of Eynsham, *Life of Saint Hugh*, 23

Eve and original sin are the quintessential expression of medieval misogyny. While Adam certainly did not have a particularly high opinion of women in general, in this case his position is determined by his narrative need to demonize this character because she challenged Hugh. When discussing or criticizing women, medieval authors seem to infallibly need to resort to heavily gendered language that they do not employ as often when criticizing male activity.

### **Guibert of Nogent's Mother**

The memoirs of Guibert of Nogent are a unique medieval text. Written around 1115 at the Monastery of Nogent, they are divided in three books: the first and most interesting one is concerned with autobiographical material, the second with the history of the Abbey of Nogent, and the third with the uprising of the Laon commune in 1112. The *Memoirs* have received considerable scholarly attention since the 1970s, when the first critical translation was published. Studied from many different perspectives ever since, they have been mined by historians looking for information on medieval motherhood, childhood, sense of self, and other aspects that the intimate and autobiographical nature of this work can illustrate.

From the very first chapter, Guibert's love and admiration for his mother is evident: "Dear God, I thank You first and foremost for having given me a mother who is beautiful yet chaste and modest and filled with the fear of the Lord."<sup>158</sup> Guibert's mother married his father, "who was himself just an adolescent,"<sup>159</sup> when still very young, and for several years the marriage remained unconsummated. It may have been the youth of the spouses to prevent the successful consummation of the marriage, and maybe the bride's secret reluctance, but Guibert gives a

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<sup>158</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confessions: the Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>159</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confessions*, 34

“magical” explanation: an old woman who wanted the groom for one of her daughters cast an evil spell on the young couple. When his father revealed that he had not been able to have sexual relations with his wife, the family tried to annul the marriage, or persuade the young couple to divorce. His father’s relatives, hoping to seize control of his lands, tried first to talk him into joining a monastery. According to Duby this was a quite tactful proposal, after all “was not a monastery the proper place for a man who was impotent?”<sup>160</sup> Then they encouraged her to run away and desert her husband: “they imagined that being far from her own family she would cave in under the pressure put upon her by strangers to her clan.”<sup>161</sup> Rich men tried to seduce her, but everything failed, and she remained steadfast, and “never allowed any temptations to lead her astray.”<sup>162</sup> Finally, thanks to another old woman, the couple could consummate the union. When Guibert, the youngest of their children, was only months old, his father died and his mother was left in charge of the household and of her underage son. The in-laws, like most medieval in-laws, “eager to own my father’s lands and possessions, conspired to gain possession of everything by excluding my mother, so they set a day for bringing the case to court.”<sup>163</sup> Guibert’s paternal relatives were probably trying to avoid granting the widow her dower, and maybe the remaining lands that she might have controlled for her son. These circumstances were not uncommon, and while Guibert presents a negative portrait of his family members, their behaviour was typical of the times. Next, the male head of the household, a cousin of Guibert, pressured the widow into remarriage. Nancy Partner has argued that Guibert’s mother had enjoyed considerable satisfaction and personal fulfillment as the head of the household, even during her marriage.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Duby, *The Knight, The Lady, and the Priest*, 141

<sup>161</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 35

<sup>162</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 35

<sup>163</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 41

<sup>164</sup> Nancy F. Partner, “The Hidden Self : Psychoanalysis and the Textual Unconscious,” in *Writing Medieval Histories*, ed. Nancy Partner (London : Hodder Arnold, 2005), 51.

When her husband was imprisoned away from home, the woman had a nightmare in which a demon sat on her and suffocated her with his weight until she was freed by a good spirit, who, in leaving, admonished her to “be a good woman.”<sup>165</sup> According to Partner, this dream was the expression of a strong sense of guilt caused by the woman’s unconscious desire for her husband’s death:

She had been enjoying herself as the head of the household, secretly welcomed her imminent freedom, rejoiced at her husband’s death and then immediately denied and disavowed this murderous wish (repellent to ego-ideal), and disguised it as grief (a classic defence) and let the conflict enact itself symbolized in a punitive rape in her marriage bed.<sup>166</sup>

Years later, the opportunity finally came to heed the good spirit’s admonishment “be a good woman,” by living as a chaste widow, while enjoying the gratifications of being the head of her household, and free from male interference. Thus she refused remarriage, when approached by the male head of the household, who told her: “Lady, you have your youth and your beauty. Wouldn’t it be best for you to remarry and enjoy life in the world? My uncle’s children would be placed under my care and I would faithfully raise them as to his possessions they would, as is customary, be legally transferred to me.”<sup>167</sup> As Duby pointed out, the son of her brother in law simply “considered it his duty to treat her as he treated his own sisters, daughters, and nieces, and to provide her with a husband.”<sup>168</sup> Her refusal to marry anyone who was not of higher social status then herself was given knowing full well that it would have been impossible for her in-laws to find such a suitor. Her stubbornness on this matter was such that, in exasperation, one of her in-laws exclaimed: “the priests have put a cross in her loins!”<sup>169</sup> But she “continued to

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<sup>165</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 41.

<sup>166</sup> Nancy F. Partner, “The Hidden Self : Psychoanalysis and the Textual Unconscious,” in *Writing Medieval Histories*, ed. Nancy Partner (London : Hodder Arnold, 2005), 51.

<sup>167</sup> Guibert of Nogent. *A Monk’s Confessions*, 42.

<sup>168</sup> Duby, *The Knight, The Lady, and the Priest*, 143

<sup>169</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 44.

protect us and our possessions, [...] taking care of her household and her children in keeping with the conventions of the world.”<sup>170</sup>

In the course of the narration, Guibert uses his mother’s marital experience as a vehicle to preach the ecclesiastical notion of marriage.<sup>171</sup> Her chastity, obedience, and submissiveness are the perfect qualities of a pious medieval wife. She accepted the requirements of married life uncomplainingly, although probably unhappy in her situation. With her rejection of remarriage, “she did not destroy the former union of [hers and her husband’s] bodies by entering into a new bond once he departed.”<sup>172</sup> In so acting she respected the preferred course of action in the eyes of the Church that did not forbid remarriage, but neither did it encourage it. Her continence and her refusal to acquiesce to the feudal logic that dictated that a widow should remarry in the interest of her family are in sharp contrast to the sexual behaviour of the other aristocrats in the story. Guibert accuses the powerful men of the area of keeping concubines, stealing wives, forcing marriages, having voracious and unchecked sexual appetites. The women are no better than the men.<sup>173</sup> Duby has noted that this behaviour was far from exceptional. Guibert is outraged and scandalized, in line with his personal problematic hatred for sex and general disgust for the society around him, but the episodes he narrates are in no way different from many others documented in medieval chronicles and histories. The *Memoirs* expresses the ecclesiastical, intransigent, view of society. Guibert’s scope was to “persuade those whom his book would be read to aspire more ardently than ever to that unsullied world, that promised Paradise.”<sup>174</sup>

His mother’s story is that of a woman who managed to overcome gender and to reunite in herself all the good female and male qualities. Her determination to be in control of herself, her

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<sup>170</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 42-43.

<sup>171</sup> Duby, *The Knight, The Lady, and the Priest*, Chapter VII

<sup>172</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk’s Confessions*, 42.

<sup>173</sup> Duby, *The Knight, The Lady, and the Priest*, 156.

<sup>174</sup> Duby, *The Knight, The Lady, and the Priest*, 125

goods, her son, and household, made it possible for her to achieve a high degree of freedom. Guibert mentions her power in the surrounding society more than once. He tells us that his tutor was compelled to abandon his previous pupil, and dedicate his attention solely to him, without fear of retaliation, because he was under his mother's protection. "Her lifelong resistance to sexuality was the core of her aggressive adoption of the masculine counter-code: cool, continent, spiritual, rational, brave, stable, self-governing."<sup>175</sup> Think back at Agnes's husband, dominated by his "evil" wife: weak, fickle, indecisive. He is close to being a paradigmatic representation of the "bad" male. Guibert's mother on the other hand is a "male" of exceptional masculine qualities. She does not take orders from anybody. Even when she decides to dedicate herself entirely to a religious life, it is under her own conditions. She persuades the bishop to build her a little house *outside* the monastery, she does not join an order, and she keeps receiving visits and having an active social life. She finds an autonomous and original way of life, outside of the alternatives usually given to women, to which Christina of Markyate seemed to have aspired. It is through her status as a widow that Guibert's mother can achieve this: "with a married woman's freedom from parental guardianship, a widow's freedom from her spouse, a mother's control over her minor child, and proprietary use of dower and perhaps feudal lands."<sup>176</sup> Her masculine exercise of authority and her independence are not the last of her qualities: "women are frivolous, vain, seductive, untrustworthy, sensual, worldly, impious. Only 'my mother' combines the feminine ideals of piety, modesty, chastity, dutifulness, and steadfastness with the masculine values of self-control, pride, courage, honor, and reputation."<sup>177</sup> Guibert's

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<sup>175</sup> Nancy F. Partner, "The Family Romance of Guibert of Nogent: His Story, Her Story," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons, Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: Garland Pub., 1996), 374.

<sup>176</sup> Partner, "The Family Romance," 373.

<sup>177</sup> Partner, "The Family Romance," 374.



representation of his mother is an example of a narrative that emphasizes both the ecclesiastical view of lay society, and the gendered use of male and feminine qualities by religious authors.

## Conclusion

Menuge has noted the incidence in medieval romance and law of “swapping babies” and “fake pregnancy” themes. He takes the example of *Beues of Hamtoun*, in which Beues’s mother pretends to be pregnant to lure her husband into the hunt that will result in his death. In legal treatises, mothers, especially widowed ones, are seen as a threat, and *Bracton* even includes a section dedicated to mothers who fake a pregnancy and procure a baby to pass off as their own. Menuge found mention of this situation in *Tres Ancien Coutoumier* as well. In his opinion, the recurrence in legal treaties and romance of these themes is an expression of the feudal system’s discomfort with widows’ autonomy.<sup>178</sup> Widows are suspected of both trying to secure land and wealth for themselves, or of working to cheat a legitimate heir of his inheritance to promote children of a second marriage. Individual autonomy in general could have been perceived as dangerous in a system, such as the feudal one, where the chief interest was that of the family. Both legal literature and romance voice the feudal point of view on this matter, presenting the readers with examples of negative egoistical female characters. According to Menuge these characters let us glimpse “the helplessness of mothers and step-mothers as second wives in feudal society.”<sup>179</sup> Medieval romance and histories present the readers with a double motherhood paradigm. On the one hand both genres are rife with “bad” mothers and step-mothers who work against the feudal system, or, more specifically, its representative character, the legitimate heir. Very often the inherent evil of these characters is symbolized by their recourse to magic. On the

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<sup>178</sup> Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 114.

<sup>179</sup> Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 119.

other hand there are also characters who embody the “good” mother: “feudal motherhood is defined in terms of the protection of the heir, especially the male heir. The mother must subsume her own desire in the interest of her son. Indeed, she does not have independent desire.”<sup>180</sup> How different from a woman like Bertrade, who was accused of trying to poison Philip’s first son to secure the crown for her own children. But she is not the only example. Orderic Vitalis accused Sichelgaita, the second wife of Robert Guiscard, of exactly the same crime.<sup>181</sup>

Linda E. Mitchell has argued that powerful dowager widows who acted independently challenged medieval notions of gender. According to Mitchell the self-governing behaviour of these women was perceived as an invasion into typically male territory: “widowed dowagers of stature, these women in some ways transcended the gendered system that expected their subordination.”<sup>182</sup> Guibert’s mother clearly fits into this description, and the language used by her son to describe her, mirrors her participation in both the male and female gender. The challenge posed by these women and their refusal to accept male dominance set them apart as a third gender; they were called *viragos*, a term that “was loaded with both positive and negative connotations.”<sup>183</sup> While Mitchell’s observations are useful in that they underline the discomfort that some forms of female independent action could cause in medieval society, I do not think that *viragos* constituted a third gender. Rather, medieval authors find, as usual, heavily gendered language the most immediate and easy way to express their perception of female action. The term *virago*, while it most certainly indicates a “manly” woman, was usually used to designate a woman whose behaviour met with the author’s approval. Wives or widows who fought to defend their castles were so indicated, but women whose actions did not meet with approval, as we have

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<sup>180</sup> Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 126

<sup>181</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 7, 29.

<sup>182</sup> Linda E. Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women: Family Marriage, and Politics in England 1225-1350* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 133.

<sup>183</sup> Mitchell, *Portraits*, 133.

already seen, were usually described in terms of hyperbolized femininity. If a widow's behaviour followed the "good" woman pattern and she acted in accord and in defense of the feudal system, like the mothers described by Menuge or the *viragos* of Mitchell, she could be praised in male terms. Guibert's mother is praised in masculine and feminine terms by her son, but Guibert had no liking for the values of feudal and aristocratic society, and he applauded his mother's ability to preserve her autonomy from people whom he, and she, despised. But her actions went against the interest of the clan, her autonomy, like the autonomy of Walter of Vladslo's widow and Agnes, was achieved at the disadvantage of her relatives.

When female autonomy threatened the patrilineal and patriarchal construct of society on which feudalism was founded, women were in most cases criticized in stereotypical female terms (unless they were fortunate enough to have a son like Guibert). Neither Galbert of Bruges nor Adam of Eynsham condoned these women's actions. Adam reiterates more than once that Agnes cheated the "rightful heir" of his inheritance, a crime he seems to consider graver than the lie or the deceit. Galbert's criticism is more veiled but subtly expressed. The humiliation of the provost is really the only element of this episode with which Galbert is truly concerned; everything else fades to the background. But let us imagine what his position would have been if the events followed the same pattern they did in Agnes' case. After Agnes's confession, her brother-in-law still does not win his inheritance back because Grace's husband, Adam de Neville, argues that a child is legitimate if the father recognizes him or her during his lifetime. Thus Grace is legally entitled to her inheritance. What if the provost and his family benefited from an ill-gained inheritance even though everyone knew the heir in question was illegitimate? I imagine Galbert would have been the staunchest supporter of feudal law and inheritance rights. Female autonomy *per se* is more or less objectionable, but there is a widespread discomfort with the notion that, if

she felt so inclined (and if she had the means), a widow could be effectively free from male authority. Medieval authors more or less rely on known literary and cultural *topoi* against women to achieve personal narrative objectives. It was fundamental for Adam to present a negative female character because she challenged Bishop Hugh. Galbert had little interest apart from emphasizing the provost's degradation and thus did not focus on the female character. Guibert wanted to express the perfection he saw in her mother, and thus demonized the rest of the society around her.

These are examples of the extremes to which medieval women were willing to go in order to secure their safety, and more importantly, their freedom. Even though Galbert, Adam, and Guibert had an agenda of their own when they wrote down these stories, their words can be made to say more than expected about medieval women.

## Conclusion

The girl from Oxford, Bertrade, and Christina are proof of the fact that some medieval women had the means and the will to fight a society more often than not determined to control their choices. However, their motives were different. Bertrade sought security and social status, while Christina wanted to strike her own path and find a new and different way of life, and the girl from Oxford sought to achieve her own sexual and romantic goals. In their respective struggles, these women came face to face with a system, the social reality of medieval Europe, which privileged male control over women. The exercise of this control in day-to-day situations was embodied by authoritative figures such as Hugh of Lincoln, the parents of Christina of Markyate, the ecclesiastical elite which excommunicated Bertrade, and, later, the chroniclers who criticized her.

The three widows of the second chapter were equally determined to seize the unique opportunity offered by their changed marital status. Their stories offer detailed examples of the opportunities that widowhood availed medieval women, and of the means available to widows who were determined to make the most of their situation. As the episodes show, in the interest of the social system, families and authorities were once again the chief obstacle to the exercise of female autonomy.

The silver lining among all these episodes is more than the misbehaviour which joins these women. They share a desire for autonomy which brought them against the patriarchal values at the core of medieval society. The women of the sources considered here are the exception rather than the rule. The mere fact that they were included in the sources should put us

on the alert. “Well behaved women seldom make history,”<sup>184</sup> and most medieval women were passed on in silence by writers with different interests, and did not expect otherwise. The few medieval women about whom we hear are those who acted outside of the norms, either in a “good” or “bad” way. The ones considered here, albeit a minority, prove that a desire for independence among medieval women, if not widespread, was nevertheless present.

Female autonomy was not something with which medieval men felt comfortable. R. Howard Bloch concluded *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* with a discussion of female autonomy and male reactions to it. He argued that, “although the discourse of courtliness, which places the woman on a pedestal and worships her as the controlling *domna*, seems to empower women along with an enabling femininity, it is yet another ruse of sexual usurpation thoroughly analogous to that developed in the early centuries of our era by the fathers of the Church.”<sup>185</sup> The increased financial independence of women in southern France in the eleventh century, which was already fading in the twelfth century, provoked a shift in male discourse from open misogyny to the more subtle employment of courtliness to achieve “the diversion of women from history by the annihilation of the identity of individual women.”<sup>186</sup> Male discourse, according to Bloch, is thus powerfully influenced by the perceived threat of female inclusion in “masculine modes of wealth.”

Bloch’s discussion was later addressed by Jennifer Smith in “Unfamiliar Territory: Women, Land, and Law in Occitania, 1130-1250.” Her discussion highlights not only how the poetic of courtliness, but also the law codes of southern France in the time period taken into consideration, show a deep seated fear and uneasiness about female autonomy. According to

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<sup>184</sup>Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1(1976): 20.

<sup>185</sup> Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 196.

<sup>186</sup> Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 197

Smith, “far from reflecting a sanctioned position of high status for women, the title *domna* reflects a movement between poetic and administrative discourses which seeks to define women, and by defining, to contain them.”<sup>187</sup> Smith goes on to say that the poetic *domna* is collocated by the poets in a poetic non-space that has no relation to reality. On the contrary, the addressee of the poem, the lord, who is named in the *tornadas* of many poems, is frequently associated with the land he controls. By removing the *domna* from the real landscape of southern France and imprisoning her in a fictional undefined landscape of imagination, while reiterating the concrete connection between land and lord, the poets analyzed by Smith are expressing their discomfort in regard to female control of land.<sup>188</sup> This discomfort emerges in law codes as well, and is the reaction to the increase in female autonomy in regard to land administration that flourished in Occitania for a very brief moment in the eleventh century: “the term [*domna*] was used to familiarize, to give name and definition, and hence thereafter to have some measure of control over, the “unfamiliar,” the woman who could act without male mediation.”<sup>189</sup>

I have already mentioned, in the previous chapter, Noel James Menuge’s article, “A Few Home Truths: The Medieval Mother as Guardian in Romance and Law.” It focuses on the literary representation of women, and in particular, women who were not subjected to male control, such as widows. These women were perceived as a potential threat to the feudal system, and thus demonized in poems and epics, and regulated in law codes and charters.

Evidently female autonomy was not something about which medieval men were too keen, and men frequently expressed unease in regard to the possibility that women could act without male mediation. The sources here investigated are one of the many expressions of male unease

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<sup>187</sup> Smith, “Unfamiliar Territories,” 19.

<sup>188</sup> Smith, “Unfamiliar Territories,” 19-40.

<sup>189</sup> Smith, “Unfamiliar Territories,” 40.

about female autonomy, and incidentally show us how women acted to achieve and maintain their limited independence.

Medieval masculinity was far from a united front and medieval women navigated a world of complex masculinities. The most investigated dichotomy in regard to medieval masculine identity has certainly been the binary opposition of religious *versus* lay. But, regardless of the many differences in the masculine identity of religious and lay men, the religious and the lay (especially feudal) worlds were strong expressions of the pre-eminence of patriarchy in medieval Europe. Medieval men, religious and lay, shared a widespread desire to keep their women in check. Members of the feudal aristocracy were, maybe more than others, conscious of both the necessity of female subordination to preserve the *status quo*, and of the threat women could represent. Feudalism was a reality entirely based on the pre-eminence of men. The male heir inherited, and the male head of the household ruled and administered: “the ideal wife [...] is after the model of Eve, a helpmate to her husband, an inferior in relation to his superior position as ‘Lord and Master,’ and the bearer of his children. [...] like his land she is the possession of her husband, and does not herself possess.”<sup>190</sup> The necessity to control women in feudal society was born out of the consciousness that only if women maintained their subordinate role and gave up their individual ambitions could the system be preserved. Medieval clergy, never particularly fond of women and sexuality, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was faced with stricter and more demanding requirements in terms of celibacy. As McNamara has stated: “separation from women reinforced the dislike and fear fostered by monastic polemic. ... Clerical misogyny reached a crescendo between the mid-eleventh and the mid-twelfth centuries. The struggle to separate men from women caused reformers to rave against married priests and, by implication,

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<sup>190</sup> Smith, “Unfamiliar Territories,” 23.



the whole sexual act. Sermons, pastoral letters, public statements of all sorts depicted women as dangerous and aggressive, poisonous and polluting.”<sup>191</sup>

Gender is a cultural construct, and gender identity is created and established through the performance of symbolic and meaningful acts, and is “learned through processes of socialization, and shaped through social interaction and social expectation.”<sup>192</sup> The performance of gender, which is the only possible affirmation of gender identity, was realized in an infinite variety of ways in medieval Europe.<sup>193</sup> Among the many expressions of gender constructs, discourse had vital importance: if gender is performed, discourse is performance. The forms of the medieval misogynistic discourse were strongly determined by the medieval conception of the genders as antipodal. Even though historians have learned to reason in terms of gender plurality, for writers of the Middle Ages there were but two genders, and they were the opposite of each other. The qualities valued in a man were the opposite of those despised in a woman.<sup>194</sup> The misogynistic expressions encountered in the sources analyzed here are a result of this strong dichotomy between male and female. The women in this thesis are described in a language that was determined by the need to describe a bad woman as the exact opposite of a good man. Where the “ideal” medieval man was reliable, honest, brave, restrained, the quintessential “bad” woman, as we have seen, had uncontrollable sexual appetites (Bertrade, the young girl from Oxford), and was devious (Bertrade, Agnes, the widow of Walter of Vladslo), manipulative, and, above all, selfish.

The selfishness behind these women’s actions is what determined their condemnation in the eyes of the writers. Medieval histories provide us with many examples of women whose

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<sup>191</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, “Herrenfrage,” 8.

<sup>192</sup> Dawn Hadley, “Introduction,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn Hadley (Harlow : Addison Wesley Longman Higher Education, 1998), 8.

<sup>193</sup> Dawn Hadley, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>194</sup> Dawn Hadley, “Introduction,” 7.

actions escaped the rigorous confines of traditional feminine behaviour, who nonetheless were praised by the authors. The many wives who defended their husband's castles from the enemy at great personal danger is probably the most often cited example. And yet, the same behaviour was sometimes harshly criticized. This highlights, then, that the action *per se* was not considered as "misbehaviour," but rather the (selfish) motives and intentions that underlay that action.

Women's self-interested action was criticized because this type of action threatened the status quo. These actions put the patriarchal nature of medieval society in peril, a society in which women were called to sacrifice their own ambitions in order to preserve (male) social values, and to protect family interests.

The fault, the "misbehaviour," of the women in the episodes studied here is not that they acted, but that they acted for selfish reasons and sought autonomy from male control. The misogynistic discourse voiced in these sources is one of the many performances of the fictions of superiority necessary to preserve medieval male dominance.

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