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LITERATURE

UNCOVERING THE SECRET: MEDIEVAL WOMEN, MAGIC AND THE OTHER

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ABSTRACT

For medieval audiences women occupied a specific, designated cultural area which, while they could freely form it according to their will and nature, was in fact imaginary and immaterial. Women in social, legal, and religious contexts were mostly counted among the receptive, inactive, and non-ruling groups. On both levels, there was a group of features universally defining all women: the strong, virtuous and independent model Aquinas lamented was replaced in real life by the sinful, carnal and weak stereotype, and the erotic, emotional, mysterious, and often wild type present predominantly in literature. Indeed, women were a source of scientific, theological, and cultural fascination because of their uncanny and complex nature, producing both fear and desire of the source and nature of the unattainable and inaccessible femininity. In social contexts, however, the enchantress seems to lose that veil of allure and, instead, is forced to re-define her identity by suppressing, denying, or losing her supernatural features. With the example of Saint Agnes from the South English Legendary *Life of Saint Agnes*, and Melior from *Partonope of Blois* (ca. 1450), the article will explore how medieval texts dealt with the complex and unruly female supernatural, and how its neutralization and subduing fitted into the moral, scientific, and cultural norms of medieval society.[1]

Keywords: medieval, women, magic, supernatural, society

Jerome, Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas,[2] and other Church fathers developed axiological proof for female inferiority in regard to men, and proposed many arguments to justify male domination in various aspects of social, spiritual,

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[2] For example, Augustine's *De Genesis ad Litteram,* Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, Jerome's *Letters*.

cultural and scientific life. These reasons stemmed from a careful analysis of the human body, anatomy, theological disputes and treatises, and reading the Scriptures and writings of ancient scholars such as Aristotle. Gradually,[3] they constructed a complex academic frame which enveloped the male fascination with the female kind. Philosophical and theological treatises laid the grounds for defining women's role in society which not only enclosed them within domestic frames, but also placed them on the receptive side of lawmaking, subject to rules they had no influence in forming.[4] The most prominent argument against women was that they were predominantly physical, in contrast to the more spiritual and intellectual dimension of the male body (Salisbury 2000: 96), an argument that defined the social treatment of women. From patristic, moralist, and scientific angles alike, it was proved that women were physically weaker, emotionally less stable, less intelligent, and less rational than men, which in turn meant that they were more susceptible to demonic influences (magic) or temptation (sin), and more natural female weaknesses deriving from their biology (for instance proneness for slander).[5] It seems, however, that even though the medieval discourse about women appears to the modern, post-feminist world to be oppressive and silencing, medieval women inhabited also a niche which was not necessarily explicitly negative, visible predominantly in literature which, being

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[3] All these influences are a complex mix of the development of scientific and philosophical thought which the early, high, and late Middle Ages underwent in the course of (re-)discoveries of Arabic and ancient thinkers, and as such surpass the scope of this paper. Richard Kieckefer (1989) gives a comprehensible account of the development of scientific thought in regard to Arabic and Greek influences, Sarah Salih (2001) traces the development of patristic thought about women (virginity, in particular) throughout the Middle Ages, and Robert Bartlett (2008) explores the medieval progress of scholastic thought regarding the natural and the supernatural, including Peter Lombard's and Thomas Aquinas' attempts to explain the nature of women as born out of a man (the question whether it was woman's nature that she had to be born out of a man, or that she only could be born like that, Bartlett 2008: 4).

[4] Studies of the female presence in legal matters such as for instance Karen Jones' 2010 inquiry into gendered crimes, Alan Harding's 2001 study of English and French legal systems and histories, as well as Barbara Hanawalt's study (1998) of the relation between gender treatment and social control, to name just a few, reveal that women were legal subjects yet with mixed agency (and this is perhaps an overstatement) in matters concerning themselves (their bodies, e.g. rape) and their possessions (for those who were entitled to own). Often, they were included in the same legal niche reserved for Jews, merchants, and children in terms of the rights they possessed, although they could be, and were, prosecuted for all crimes (of which some were particularly gendered, such as infanticide). There were, as it might be stated with a high degree of certainty, no female lawmakers of any influence (even if there were influential women within communities).

[5] Edwin David Craun (1997) discusses in more detail the crime of slander which, both as a sin and a crime, would arise from a whole group of "sexual crimes" such as fornication, incest, sodomy and adultery (Bardsley 2007: 144), and was particularly often a female crime due to the female association with physicality and sex crimes.

a rich "source of attitudes and values" present in medieval life and a facilitator of "the understanding of real life" for medieval audiences (Kieckhefer 1989: 101), will be here of primary interest as a cultural space in which the real and imaginary medieval ideas on women meet.

Mysterious shrines of lust and life, they were as much desired, as feared. The fear, termed by Corinne Saunders (2007: 52) as the fear of the Other or simply the fear of the unknown, derived from the obscure mechanisms of the female body and character. It was not only the female proneness to sin which made them troublesome, at the very least, for the moral and social life of the community, but female nature itself. Interpretations of this nature, in turn, led to inquires about the complicated manner in which women did (or rather, arguably, did not) fit into the realm of the natural defined by scientists and scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas. The female wildness, the uncanny nature of the female body producing pure life out of an impure act, the mixture of the sacred and profane, was what made them creatures of so much interest to medieval patriarchal societies. With the analysis of the SEL The *Life of Saint Agnes* and the anonymous *Partonope de Blois* as medieval literary manifestations of the interrelation between the fascination with, and the fear of, the female being uncanny, it will be suggested that its subjection to rules set out by society is not only necessary, but also in line with the development of medieval culture and society and that these two texts, albeit belonging to two very different genres, unanimously voice a deeply rooted medieval conviction that women needed to deny their uncanny nature before they could become members of an ordered society. While not always (in fact, rather rarely)[6] explicitly negative, the presentation of women as magical, wild, unchecked, and governed by rules other than those of the world inhabited by men makes women not only the biological and intellectual Other of men (a subject widely covered in feminist and post-feminist research), but also the Other of social order, reason, and nature – a cause of distress and unease in the ordered scholastic world.

The question of nature is here therefore of high importance. The definitions of what is in accordance with nature, and what in opposition to it, illustrate the existence of a special sphere whose qualities are neither of the former, nor the latter: the female zone.[7] It is a grey area, neither natural nor unnatural, as women in the Middle Ages occupied a space marked both by patristic theories, and the inexplicable medical and magical planes of female existence, rendering women neither completely natural (inferior to the nature of man), nor unnatural (as they

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6 Though examples of negative presentations of uncanny women could also be easily provided, such as Morgan le Fay (referred to below), or the evil stepmother of Alphouns in *William of Palerne*.

7 According to Elaine Showalter (1981: 198-201), this could be termed as the "female wild zone", imaginary in nature, which delineates a space for women free not only from influence, but also from the very language, of men.

gave birth to new people, including new men), but rather pronouncedly supernatural. Robert Bartlett (2008: 1-3) defined the supernatural as dichotomous with the natural, "nature", to the medieval mind an opaque distinction creating a dubious, debatable and troublesome world with phenomena and entities undeterminably belonging to either of the two worlds. While scholastic writers such as Peter Lombard tended to interpret the world as consisting of seminal things endowed by God to reveal the power of nature, and those reserved to God which were beyond nature (marvels and miracles), Bartlett recounts the course in which there gradually emerged the fully conceived concept of the supernatural (along with the uses of the word itself) and with it, the problem of allocating within this scholastically constructed world, those elements of the supernatural which were evil, such as monsters (2008: 6-9). God was believed to act through miracles and nature alike (Watkins 2007: 23), and, consequently, an acceptance of the phenomena beyond the grasp of the human mind was a part of medieval spiritual life. The existence of demonic creatures was widely acknowledged through belief in the devil and his followers, originating in the Bible, but because theological concepts did not exist in isolation but often met, and coincided, with both medieval folk traditions and science, beliefs in demons, devils, and magic were not exclusively of biblical origin and form. The medieval supernatural denotes, therefore, neither an exclusively religious, scientific, nor folk concept, but rather, as Saunders (2010: 60) defines it "a complex intersection of ideas: providence and divine intervention, angels and demons, the otherworld and the marvellous".[8]

The supernatural according to this, and other possible definitions, consists of unexplained phenomena, creatures, and actions of a non-natural kind, and as such can be defined as containing, and being of, magic. A complex mixture of belief, ritual, science, and folk traditions, magic according to Richard Kieckhefer was "essentially a branch of medieval science", a place where popular culture met learned culture (1989: 1), and indeed, the boundaries between magic and science were often blurred. Both Kieckhefer (1989) and Bartlett (2008) point out, however, that the search for boundaries was of particular interest mainly to theologians and philosophers, as both natural and demonic magic (as defined by Kieckhefer 1989: 1) were a perversion of religion, yet for the non-scientific and non-scholastic audiences of, for instance, romances, as well as those busy with a mundane life, magic was in fact more interesting because of what it could do and less where it came from. There is ample evidence of many practices on the verge of medicine and magic, psychology and therapy, and magic, even of parish priests

[8] This definition, as opposed to the classic definition of the fantastic, marvellous and the uncanny, by Tzvetan Todorov, includes the medieval context and thus is of primary use here, although the phases Todorov (1975: 24-25) describes as occurring in the experiencing of the supernatural are echoed here in the descriptions of taming the unknown as represented by women.

performing healing rituals (which from the thirteenth century onwards was a crime prosecuted by bishops, cf. Kieckhefer 1989: 56). For non-clerical venturers into the world of magic (sometimes also for monks and clerics acting without the knowledge of, or against, their supervisors), the use of magic or even the mere listening to those who claim to have contact with it was a grave sin, punishable severely both by secular and religious codes. The moralist and religious prohibitions against the use of magic were expressed both by actual prosecution in ecclesiastical courts, and in literature. For instance, sin manuals such as the one attributed to Bartholomew Iscanus:

> [i]f anyone pays respect to soothsayers, augurs, enchanters, or makes use of philtres, let him be anathema. Whoever by any magic turns aside a judgement of God, shall do penance for two years. He who is a magician for the sake of love and does not bring it to success shall do penance for two years. If he does, five years. If adultery results, ten years. ... A woman who by magical trick prevents the consummation of a legal marriage shall do penance for five years.
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> (*The Penitential of Bartholomew Iscanus, Bishop of Exeter 1161-84; on Magic*, Fol. 32r. Col. I)

There were, however, areas of life in which religion accepted, embraced, or even used the supernatural and the belief in magic for its own purposes. Rogationtide, for instance, was a process of sanctifying the borders of the parish against evil forces and creatures, and combined with other celebrations, the Eucharist, Corpus Christi or miracle plays "reinforced the parishioners' sense of wonder" (Thiery 2009: 68-69, 83). Blessings shared similar mechanisms, when divine benediction was expected in return for praise, prayer and worship (Rivard 2009: 19). Traditional religion meant that some feast days were endowed with ludic components and folk enthusiasm (Duffy 1992: 137).

Also religious writings, hagiographies in particular, used magic and the supernatural for didactic purposes and entertainment alike. Some saints were allegedly the authors of prayers used as charms, for instance Saint Eugene (Kieckhefer 1989: 72), and others were credited with many miraculous and uncanny actions. The female saint lives abound in stories of women whose heroism was rewarded with eternal life in heaven. These tales were pervaded with magic and mystery much more than the lives of male saints. For instance, Saint Margaret of Antioch faced and defeated the dragon (Satan) by tearing him apart from inside after being consumed by him, Saint Dorothy spoke to invisible angels, Saint Agatha's breasts grew back after being severed, Saint Christine of Tyre lived through years of constant and inventive torture, and Christina Mirabilis[9] was said to extract milk

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9 Although she was never officially canonized, being too controversial, despite her wide popular veneration, and hagiographical attention of, for instance, Thomas de Cantimpré (ca. 1232).

and oil from her untouched breasts, fly like a bird, walk under water and throw herself into flames without feeling pain, to name just a few. The use of magic in these texts always had a narrow context, as it occurred explicitly through God's intervention, yet there is no denying that the authors of the stories oriented holy women on the same side as did the authors of romances or poems: on the side of the magical, uncanny.[10] Thus although the separation of religious and secular medieval writings might be justified in various contexts, when investigating the approach to women it seems justified to surpass the generic distinctions because the questions of magic and the supernatural, which women were in many ways manifestations of, connect the religious and the popular. In both texts which will be discussed here, there is a woman who is considered by others as somehow out of the ordinary – Saint Agnes is a beautiful, pure virgin accused of witchcraft, and Melior is a princess with magical, yet as she herself acknowledges godly, abilities, whose power is taken away from her. Both texts contain stories of women of uncanny beauty, virtue, skill and power, and in both it is magic and the supernatural, and later their loss, which define the heroines.

The place of women's literature on the side of magic allots them with many shapes (Saunders 2007: 39-40), either as witches, such as Morgan Le Fay, monsters, such as Melusine from the *Romans of Partenay de Lusingen*, eerie lovers like the fairy Tryamour of *Sir Launfal*,[11] or shape-shifting loathly ladies such as Dame Ragnelle. Their qualities vary according to their role in the text, whether they are those doing magic, or those to whom it is done, and whether their intentions are pure, evil, or simply not of this world (such as is the case with fairies), though in the latter case (as exemplified by Tryamour or the ghost in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*) their interests are in fact either very earthly (as the fairy's desire for Launfal) or concerned with the souls of those on earth (as the ghost of the queen delivering a warning).[12] Women who are magical creatures such as fairies or loathly ladies seem to have, on the whole, different roles to fulfil, and a different fate awaits them than those who become enchanted, or are enchantresses (or witches) themselves, and the latter, i.e. women of magical qualities rather than magical origin by birth, will be of interest here.

The South English Legendary *Life of Saint Agnes* is a thirteenth century version of a much earlier text whose popularity lasted until the late Middle Ages,

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[10] There are also stories of male saints and hermits, such as Saint Eustace, who saw a cross shining through the antlers of a deer, and others who faced devils and other trials, yet it is invariably female martyrs and saints whose lives are pervaded with not only divine and devilish interference, but also with magic and the supernatural.

[11] In the Middle English version attributed to Thomas Chestre, based on the lay of Marie de France and possibly also *Sir Lauendevale* (Saunders 2007: 41).

[12] Ghosts warning the living about the pains of purgatory or hell were also common in didactic pastoral literature such as John Mirk's *Festial*, but there was no clear insistence on ghosts being exclusively female in such stories.

for instance in Caxton's versions of saint lives published in the fifteenth century. The main heroine, Agnes, whose suffering ultimately renders her a saint, is presented from two viewpoints, one of the Christian readers, to whom she is introduced as a pure and innocent virgin, and of the pagan and superstitious community she is a part of,[13] for whom she is revealed to be a witch. While such a dichotomy was not uncommon in hagiographical texts as it served the didactic purpose of polarizing non-Christians as cruel heathens, highlighting the injustice done to the heroine, it is also an interesting point of reference to the ideas on magic and superstition discussed earlier. The vilification and prosecution of witches was, in fact, both an Episcopal and secular way of fighting superstition by punishing the alleged witch herself,[14] and by setting a public example for others. The re-telling of an early medieval text with the use of a term and crime existing already in antiquity, yet with acquired force and focus of the high and later Middle Ages, seems to draw on current concerns contemporizing the story for the audience of the SLE, and later also of Caxton's text. While it would be perhaps an overstatement to suggest that the story focuses on the supernatural as a female force of the same kind as that of lady Tryamour, it does exemplify the hagiographical tendency to tell stories of female saints with the use of various and vivid supernatural components enriched with the social and moral contentions magic and the supernatural was recognized to have in relation to women as a part of society, be it pagan or Christian.

The story of Agnes begins when she refuses to marry the city Constable's son, a Roman pagan. To his despair and his father's fury, she declares she will never agree to be defiled: "þat maide seide: 'go fram me: þov luþe[r] deþes fode! Woldestþov defouli mi bodi?: þov ne bringest me neuere in þat mode'" (*Vita Sancte Agnetis*, ll. 22-23). Agnes refuses the marriage offer as an attempt on her body in accordance with the Christian favouring of virginity as the superior Christian state, and as is typical for stories of virgin martyrs, it is the virgin herself who refuses the offer, and not her parents as would be the typical procedure for arranging a marriage, with the parents discussing the details of the contract or refusing it (in some hagiographical stories it was the parents who entreated the virgin to marry a pagan). Her pointedly negative reaction is treated as offensive, as in terms of the social structures indicated in the text, the Constable was of a higher social status, wealthy, and thus theoretically a worthy candidate. While this is normally irrelevant in virgin martyrs stories, or serves to highlight the valour and spiritual superiority of the girl who does not succumb to the promises of earthly comfort that would defy her faith, the story of Saint Agnes also provides an insight into certain mechanisms of dealing with unruly women which, although necessarily overstated to depict the pagans as merciless, also seem to fall in line with typical modes of

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[13] The story refers to the times of early Christianity during the Roman Empire.

[14] Most often, particularly in the later Middle Ages, it was women who were put on trial for magic.

punishing and abusing women. The one which instantly comes to mind is, used numerously both in texts where a knight ravishes a lady against her will, and in life with frequent instances of sexual violence, rape or sexual humiliation. Indeed, the Constable orders her to be stripped naked in public for refusing his son's advances: "þe Constable let somony al þe cite : and brouȝte þis mayde heom bi-fore; / hire for-to schiende, he dude hire strepe : so naked so he[o] was i-bore, / Þat ech man scholde i-seon hire derne limes : þe more hire to schende" (*VSA*, ll. 40-43). What follows endows the story with a magical context, tying it to social aspects of the treatment of women contemporary to the audience, as this gender and power based conflict becomes, in many ways, a witch trial. The defence Agnes assumes against the sexual humiliation is as follows: "þare was on hire swete heued : so muche fair her i-come, / Þat hudde al hire swete bodi : þat it tilde bi-neothe hire kne; / Þo ne miȝten men for here : of hire bodi nouȝt i-se" (*VSA*, ll. 47-49).

This magic is, typically for a saint story, divine influence and for the Christian audience Agnes is proved to be graced with God's protection, yet the story can only progress in its course because the same audience also understands that to those who did not comprehend the providence of such a kind, the event would be clear evidence for witchcraft. If approached from this angle, the fact that Agnes continues to use supernatural power to defend herself from carnal defilement, or perhaps from merited punishment, from the point of view of the story appears justifiably outrageous. It is also, even though again not surprising in the hagiographical genre, a very clear reminder that the female body can be used by a divine or devilish agency for disruptive and defiant purposes. After all, the angels could have protected Agnes by other means, less explicitly connected to her body.[15] Yet, it is the body, again, which is to serve as a tool of Agnes' humiliation, as she is placed in a brothel where she is to expect a visit from the Constable's son. Placed in a chamber to await her fate, she prays to God for help and an angel appears to her, giving her "a roket" to cover herself. Immediately, the room is filled with light so bright, that she becomes invisible:

> [a]n hous þat seruede of bordel : þare was bi-side / Þare-Inne þe constable hire let do : and sethþe het crie wide / Þat alle þat wolden folie don : þudere scholden wende / And finde þare a fol womman : of bodie fair and hende. / Þo þat Maide was þare-Inne i-do : so ful was þat hous of liȝte / Þat no man for brijȝt-hede : þat Mayde i-seo ne miȝte.
>
> (*VSA*, ll. 51-56)

[15] The female body subjected to torture is a frequent motif in saint stories, particularly the mutilation of breasts (the story of Saint Agatha, for instance, where her breasts are cut off by her torturer Quintian, yet are grown back by the power of Saint Peter), it is rare for stories to highlight not parts of the female body which can be tortured and thus win her sainthood (as a sacrifice for faith), but those which are female attributes (such as long hair) and serve as a defence and not subjection.

This is, again, God's doing, yet is quite untypical for a saint story in the sense that it is not physical torture she is delivered from, as is encountered in other stories such as that of Saint Christine of Tyre, who overcame long years of inventive tortures with the help of God's angels,[16] or Saint Elizabeth of Hungary whose self-mortification was encouraged and rewarded by God. Instead, Saint Agnes is aided from sexual humiliation through a miracle (in scholastic terms) making use of light which, being on the one hand a Christian symbol of purity appropriate in the context, and on the other hand soon appeared to be also a destructive force. When the Constable's son enters the brothel, he is immediately struck dead: "[þ]e constables sone cam for-to don with hire : ase he hadde er i-seid: / And are he miȝte þat Maiden handli : he fel a-doun stan-ded" (*VSA*, ll. 75-76).

Agnes managed to defend herself by enforcing her persecutor's death. Saint Christine of Tyre spit out her tongue into the eye of her torturer and hurt him thus, Saint Agatha outlived one of her torturers and was only martyred by another one, various other saints also were involved in the physical damage done to the *prosecutors*, yet never fatally, as it was the damage done to the prospective *saints* that was the core of these stories, sanctifying pain and martyrdom. In the case of Agnes, the torturer who in fact never became one, was instantly killed for the very intent of defiling the chosen maiden of God, yet from the perspective of society in the text, as would be well understood by the audience of the legend, Agnes killed an innocent young man of noble lineage. The murder of a noble man by a commoner (the story underscores that Agnes was not of any noble descent) was by far one of the gravest crimes in medieval Europe, in itself punishable with death. Additionally, being a story of a woman, and of a crime committed with no apparent use of any weapon or poison, witchcraft is added to Agnes' list of crimes. Stories of such transgressions abounded in the Middle Ages (Kieckhefer 1989: 81, 176, 192-193), with women accused of using magic to kill men and children, for vengeance, malice, or by a tragic mistake. Thus the audience, despite the superiority of being Christian and thus knowing Agnes was in fact a handmaiden of God, could see and understand that cases such as hers, when devoid of their divine component, were stories of evil witches who deserved to be punished. This is indeed the case in the story:

> "Comiez hidere, men, and sleth þis **wichche** : for heo hath i-do a luþer dede: / Þe Constables sone heo hath a-slawe : here ȝe mouwen i-seo. / Comiez nouþe bliue and nimeth hire : þat heo a-wei ne fleo!" / Þat folk cam reke a-boute þis hous : and founden þat it was ded. / Alle þe baillifs

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16 She was, however, eventually tortured to death.

> þudere comen : to nimen þar-of red. / **Some seiden þat heo wichche was** : **some þat heo was guod**, / And alle for þe childes deþe : wroþe weren in heore mod.
>
> (*VSA*, ll. 82-88)[17]

Extracting her from the religious aspect of the text, Agnes represents a woman endowed with magical abilities who protects her chastity and body. She commits various acts of social disobedience, refusing a generous marriage offer, and then attacking and killing a noble man who did not, in fact, hurt her, a crime all the more serious as the idea of self-defence did not yet then nor for a long time after, penetrate legal and social thought, and there is ample evidence in romances, such as *Sir Gowther* or *Sir Degareé*, that women could fight rape by escaping their pursuers or screaming for help, but did not physically fight back, let alone kill to prevent the rape.

Divine protection allows Agnes to perform acts she would be otherwise incapable of, and in the end she is rewarded for the suffering she experiences because of them with sainthood. These abilities that she is endowed with, however, are precisely what brings her demise as the story constructs a viable and realistic setting in which her use of magic is seen as precisely that, destructive and wild magic. Thus she is on the one hand a chosen virgin of God, yet on the other she is a sorceress, a disobedient and rebellious woman who tries to defy social rules and customs, and who shows no respect neither to social rank, nor law. Her prosecution and punishment are therefore justified because in the reality of the text, as understood by its audience, it is only the Christian component, which the story's internal world lacks, that would save Agnes from the charges she would otherwise face both according to the laws of the story, and according to the laws in the real world of the legend's audience. A wild, unpredictable, and magical woman could not win against a society in which laws were strict both against female agency, for instance in the matter of marriage, and most stern about the use of questionable, potentially demonic and certainly dangerous forces, all the more if their use effectuated deaths. If it was a nobleman who was killed by a commoner, the crime of social order violation was added to the list of transgressions.

The story of Saint Agnes, although this might not be obvious at a superficial level, displays elements of certain folk tales, which, when compared to the saint legend, shed light on those elements in the story which, as was remarked before, seem not to fit the hagiographical genre at all. A woman growing her hair in order to cover herself can be seen as a fusion of two stories, namely *The Maiden in the Tower* (AT 310) and *The Maiden Without Hands* (AT 706). In the former story, a heroine trapped in a tower grows her hair to communicate with the

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[17] Emphasis mine, JL.

world, using it as a means of defying her captor, whereas the latter is a story of a virgin who, when she finds herself attacked by the devil, draws a magical circle to protect herself within its boundaries. Both stories thus contain heroines whose use of magic serves a protective purpose devoid of divine agency and in both this use of magic is rewarded in the sense that the heroine is rescued from peril. The fact that Agnes covered herself with hair as if it was a cloak also seems to echo different kinds of folk stories, namely those of the swan/silkie wives. While Agnes never became the wife she was initially encouraged to be, her story otherwise resembles tales of female shape-shifting wives. In *The Silkie Wife* and in *The Mermaid Wife* alike, a man comes across a group of dancing naked women (or both men and women), and notices seal, or fish, depending on the story, skins lying on the ground. When the dancers notice him, they run to the skins, put them on and turning into seals/mermaids, jump back to the sea; all but one whose skin the man grabbed before she could reach it does not escape. He then persuades the woman to become his wife, and since she cannot escape with him holding her magical mantle away from her, she agrees. They have children, live together happy or less so, until the magical realm the wife comes from reclaims her, when the mantle is found by one of her children, and presented to her. She puts it on and abandons her earthly family.

Agnes, naturally, did none of the above as she never married the Constable's son, yet her hair did, as the mantles of these stories, define her supernatural qualities, in the sense that as the discovery of the skins on the seashore by men in the folk stories made them understand they were dealing with supernatural creatures, so did the moment Agnes covered herself with her hair as a coat also prove to her attackers she was endowed with magical powers. The loss of the coats means for the supernatural heroines that they become constrained with the rules of the earthly world, rules which do not allow them to embrace their supernatural being and abilities which stemmed from it, and so did the loss of this mantle by Agnes, when she was imprisoned and then tried and executed for the use of magic, mean that no magic was allowed in an ordered and lawful society. The religious nature of the text is thus mixed with stories familiar to the audience of other heroines of such kind, in respect of the use of the supernatural perhaps much more akin to them than other saint stories. The use of light in the story, while religious in meaning, can also be referred to other stories in which light has the power to conceal, or reveal, as is the case with the fifteenth century Middle English adaptation of a thirteenth century French romance, *Partonope of Blois*, which makes use of both the supernatural wife, and light motifs.

The story itself dates back to the Greek tale of Cupid and Psyche (Wells 1916: 146), yet it is reversed here as the light condition (explained below) concerns Melior, the woman, and not the man (Cupid) as in the original. Similarly to the heroine of the *Life of Saint Agnes*, Melior is presented from two points of view, as a maiden and a magician, an enchantress not a witch, yet

there is in the story a different figure who most definitely merits the name. The distinction between a witch and an enchantress is important as, aside from the former being straightforwardly negative and the latter much less so, it also carried a different cultural meaning. Kieckhefer (1989: 1997) provides in-depth studies of various instances of scientific, philosophical, and moralist attempts to tackle the question of magic, yet its female practitioners were invariably called witches or magicians, and the stories of the prosecution of those meddling with magic give the names of witches, sorcerers, necromancers, leeches, divinators, demonologists, astrologers, or chiromancers, yet the concept of the enchantress seems to be reserved to, or at least strongly claimed by, literary texts. *Partonope of Blois* features two female characters whose use of magic is a fusion of both the literary and realistic images of female magicians: the figure of the witch as the evil-doer, also present as the projected fears of the audience in the *Life of Saint Agnes*, and the literary enchantress, as defined by Corinne Saunders (2007). The presentation of the main heroine, Melior, is different than that of Agnes in the sense that Agnes' purity and alleged witchcraft were both imposed on the audience and none of the two characteristics were of her own active introduction. Mellor, on the other hand, actively constructs her own image in the story to both the reader and Partonope, although the audience soon realizes there is more to Melior than she allows Partonope to see, literally and figuratively, though not in a negative way. In other words, as Saunders persuasively argues (2007: 44), the eroticism of the romance, Melior's desire and how she succumbed to it, ultimately present her to the audience not as an innocent virgin but rather as a woman fully aware of her appetites, an image by no means negative, perhaps even more captivating to the audience, yet not in accordance with what Melior herself intended to be seen as. Saunders concludes her discussion of the story by pointing out that Melior's desire brought her downfall as it placed her back within the constraints of her gender (2007: 44), I would like to focus more on the meaning her choice of achieving her desire's wish, magic, had for this defeat, or downfall.

The romance tells the story of Partonope, a knight who after pursuing a boar in a hunt comes across an enchanted boat. It takes him to a country in which he finds a castle, a feast awaiting him, and finally a chamber with a bed. When he lies down, in darkness, he is joined by the mistress of the castle, Melior. She then reveals that both the boar hunt, and the boat, were the effects of her spell cast in order to bring Partonope to her, and to: "parfourme now alle my desire / Therefore I suffer alle youre plesyre / For when ye entred in to this Citee / I had ordeyned my love" (*Partonope of Blois*, ll. 74-77). The knight is, indeed, enchanted by her. Although he could not see her, as they only met in darkness, he expresses his wish to marry her. Melior sets a condition, similarly to fairy lovers such as Lady Tryamour, that Partonope must not see her for two and a half years but in darkness, and he will only be able to see her once they marry:

> [s]aue onely syght desyre ye not of me / Tylle tyme come which ys nother ferre ne nere / But two yere henne and one half a yere / This shulde to yow be none hevy a bydyng / Of me ye shulle haue speche play and felyng ... I shall be weddyd to yow Partonope / In this meane while hit shall so **ordeynyd** be / This love betwen vs shall be kept pryvee.
>
> (*PB*, ll. 171-175; 193-195)

The privacy she insists on in their meetings does not, by any means, prevent joyful lovemaking between them, and her promises to satisfy all his wishes. She reveals herself to be almost as expert in the art of love as fairy mistresses:

> [m]y swete loue sayde this lady free / A nyghtys ye shulle redy have me / To parforme alle youre hertys desire / In kyssing in feelyng at alle youre plesyre / To yow my hert I wylle euer redy be ... And euery nyght a fayre and softe bedde / And me ther in redy yow to comforte / Wyth alle my herte to make yow dysporte.
>
> (*PB*, ll. 166-170; 183-185)

In fact, Partonope cannot be sure if she is not a fairy, and her insistence on keeping away from his sight, and the clear proof and admittance she is familiar with the use of magic only strengthen this possibility. Yet, because their story is not that of a knight captured by the elf queen, as was the case with Sir Launfal, but a story which is, explicitly, to lead to marriage, Partonope becomes uncomfortable with his bride's use of magic. The gender roles reappear because, again, social norms insist that good women, wives, are submissive and orderly, and do not set conditions to their husbands, nor do they possess skills of a questionable source that are potentially dangerous.

Melior also fits the motif of the supernatural wife in the sense that she also cannot, as it seems, reconcile her magical qualities with her role as a prospective wife, though in her case it is neither skin nor hair she wears as a supernatural cloak, but the darkness she conjures up in the bedchamber to hide her, as it increasingly seems to Partonope, true nature. Melior is indeed the true enchantress as "[a]round her weave fears as well as fantasies of sexuality, transformation, death and desire, and ultimately the wish to know and possess, as well as the fascination of the other, the unknown" (Saunders 2007: 52). The fears and the desire to know the unknown are motivated, in Melior's case, by her status as Partonope's bride and an uncanny woman at the same time as, revealed in what follows, the two cannot be reconciled as they cannot be in other stories of supernatural wives. The Swan Maiden tales (for instance AT 400 *The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife*), silkie/mermaid wives stories, and romances alike all prove that once marriage enters the stage, the supernatural side of the wife needs to disappear; the marriage will never take place, or will be terminated. This is the case in *Romans of Partenay* (*Roman de Melusine*), a tale of a heroine strongly

connected with the tale of Melior as, according to its recounting of the history of the Lusingen family, Melior and Melusine were sisters. They, along with their third sister Palestine, were daughters of King Helmas and the fairy Presine, whom he married and promised never to see in childbirth. When he broke his promise, after she gave birth to all three sisters at once, she abandoned him and took the girls with her. When they reached the age of fifteen she revealed to them their story and all three, led by Melusine, punished their father by imprisoning him in a mountain for which Presine, in turn, punished them, giving each of the three a different punishment. Melusine, the eldest, wisest and most prudent of the three, was to turn into a serpent from the waist-down on Saturdays, Melior, the fairest, was to be kept in a castle in Armenia (this I will come back to below), and Palestine, the youngest, was banished to keep unending watch over her father's treasure until a knight comes and takes it by force and then conquers Palestine herself (*Romans of Partenay*, pp. 152-161).

As the tale later recounts in detail, Melusine indeed became a half-serpent, but managed to marry the lord of Lusingen and bear him sons. The only condition was that he was never to see her on Saturdays. Eventually, however, he broke the promise and upon seeing her in her serpent shape, regardless of their initial reconcilement, their marriage was broken and Melusine fled the castle. Supernatural wives, as the story proves, cannot remain magical if they want to remain married, or must otherwise abandon their marriage if they want to keep (or cannot shed) their supernatural qualities. It is therefore not surprising that Partonope grew worried, as time progressed, about the true nature of his wife. The same tale which describes the story of Melusine mentions also that Melior's punishment was to be, in fact, being placed in a remote castle and to keep guard over a deathless sparrow-hawk. Whoever wanted to ask her for a gift had to watch it for three days and nights without sleep. If he succeeded, he could have anything he liked except her as a wife. If he failed and succumbed to sleep, he was her prisoner forever. The king of Armenia, as *Romans* recounts, won the right for the gift yet he asked for Melior, bringing downfall on him and his family, as Melior angrily refused (*RP*, pp. 185-196). While she was undoubtedly tied by her mother's curse, it is clearly pointed out in the story she was also angry with him, and refused also out of her own will. It is additionally emphasized that the fate of the knights visiting the castle was to be as described above because they would visit it in order to obtain gifts (boons) from Melior, yet there is no mention of any particular reason why she could not marry. She could not, however, leave the castle, and all those who came to its walls sought only prizes. It follows, then, that she would need to enact a knight coming to her castle ignorant of its story if she wanted to marry. This is what she seems to have done in *Partonope of Blois*, where Melior lured Partonope to her castle, fulfilled all his desires, and imposed magical constraints of a different kind than the ones described in the romance of Melusine. The two stories are, of course, not necessarily connected in any simple

way, and so inconsistencies between the two are to be expected. And yet, there seems to be also continuity between them in the sense that in *Partonope*, it is Melior who is the agent of the plot, not a subjective gift-giver, and works actively to secure for herself her heart's desire.

For such independence (however, nonetheless, constrained) she chooses magic to aid her, but when her wishes are fulfilled the same magic appears to be the one thing that threatens her happiness. The condition she imposes on Partonope, if read through *Romans de Partenay*, might be interpreted not only as a quality of a fairy, to set conditions to test their knights, but also as a reversal of what was to be her role in the castle in Armenia, and perhaps her way of escaping her mother's punishment. When a knight succeeded and was to ask for the gift, she would appear to him, dressed in green (as was, for instance, Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), and after exposing to his eyes all her beauty, deny it to him. In the case of Partonope, he is *not* to see her, thus revoking the curse she is under: her body, in plain sight serving the will of Presine, in darkness fulfils Melior's own purpose. The condition, however, cannot hold because Partonope, a true knight, cannot succumb to the power of a woman to be his wife. Having left Melior's castle, he seeks the counsel of his mother who tries to persuade him that following a woman's conditions does not befit a knight. When he resists her pleads to forget about Melior, his mother gives him a magic potion she concocted, to force his love out of his memory. After setting out on a quest to fight Saracens, Partonope is given the hand of a French princess as a reward and, having forgotten Melior because of his mother's magic, he betroths her:

> I thank yow Sir sayde Partonope / He wende alle this had bene ryght wele / His olde love was forgete eche dele / He kysseth his love he maketh her chere / He was in wylle had he hadde leysere / And place this ys syker as day / To haue pleyed the comoun play / Of which these lovers haue such plesaunce / **ffor melioure was clene oute of remembraunce**.
>
> (*PB*, ll. 3017-3025)

The mother thus represents the use of evil, or demonic magic, and is an example of not only a culturally and historically present image of a woman-magician whose craft is used to harm others, evil sorceresses who abused medical and healing magic, substituting poison for a cure either by mistake or by intent (Kieckhefer 1989: 81). Partonope's mother embodies also the literary image of a witch, whose aim is to damage, threaten, or otherwise hurt the main heroine, as was, for instance, the motivation of Morgan Le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. And as Braunde put a spell on Alphouns to turn him into a werewolf and secure her own son to be the king of Spain in *William of Palerne*, so did Partonope's mother wish him to become heir of France and to marry the French princess yet in order to do that, since she could not reach Melior herself, she used magic for her to be forgotten.

Even though this places her, evidently, as Melior's enemy, her motivation is in fact that of a concerned mother (e.g. ll. 2870-2959) and so although she does try to take Partonope away from Melior, her vilification in the text arises more from the way she attempts to do that, i.e. by using sorcery, than the driving force of her actions. There are, therefore, two uncanny women in this romance where one uses explicitly evil magic and the other uses magic in a way which is not explicitly good (she does not, for instance, heal anyone as did Dame Lynet to the opponent of Sir Gareth), yet, it does not seem to be evil either. In fact, Melior, as opposed to Partonope's mother, provides not only an explanation for her use of magic, but also ensures that it is known to her lover and, importantly, the audience as well, that the source of her magic is not evil. She explains her father sent her to be schooled in all of the sciences

> [t]o lerne me clergye and gret wysdoun / That I myght the better gouerne the kingdom / An hundereth maystres I had and moo / And god yaff me grace to lerne soo / That the Sevyn seyence I cowde perfytely / And after that lerned I / To know of euery herbe the virtue / And eke of Rothis where euer they grew / Whether they in kynde be colde or hote / The maner of Spyces I know by rote / How in phisike they haue her worching / The syeke in to heele I canne wele bring / After this I lernyd dyvynite / Thre persones to know of the trynyte / By than I was xv. yere of Age / My maystres that were bothe wyse and sage / In alle the vyarse *I dyd hem passé / **Thanne to nygromancy sett I was / Thanne I lernyd enchauntements** / To know the craft of experiments / In my chambre ofte tymes pryvyly / **dyd crafte full mervelously** ... By the wytte that god hath sent me.
>
> (*PB*, ll. 3205-3256)

As she reveals, her magic comes from learning and is in accordance with God's will. Her future evil mother-in-law also sought the council of a clergyman, yet there is no indication as to the source of her magic, and precisely because it is not indicated, with its purpose clearly being to fight Melior, it can be safely proposed that she indeed was the "old hag" stereotype as, again, in real life many of the women prosecuted for, or at least accused of, witchcraft, were old women who "[d]oubtless ... tended ... to be ill-natured sorts who bore resentment toward those about them and inspired resentment in return" (Kieckhefer 1989: 193). Not necessarily that strongly polarizing in the text, Partonope's mother is clearly the resentful and strong-willed mother in law, and is indeed, as it transpires in the course of the story, the one who breaks Melior's will and command.

Partonope, having woken out of the oblivious state imposed by the magic potion remembers his first love and swiftly asks her forgiveness, which is granted. Soon, however, he is again troubled by the arrangement Melior

imposed on him and again calls on his mother to ask her advice. She narrates his story to a bishop and expresses the real concern that troubles her in regard to Melior. As was explained above, although there are not many references to *Romans of Partenay* in *Partonope of Blois*, the obvious relation of Melior to Melusine and other parts of her story give grounds for the mother to fear that Melior is in fact an evil creature, and her son

> [y]s take wyth feendes of the ffayry / flfor aloone he gothe that I / Ne wote in a moneth where hym to fende / And alle his meyne he levys hym behynde / He lateth hym aloone Sir sykerly / She hath defended hym highly / That he desyre not hir to see / This ys a wonder thing to me / They mete neuer but a nyght / Of hir had he yett neuer no sight / He fyndeth wyth hir alle maner of plesaunce / **Hit ys a feende or som myschaunce**.
>
> (*PB*, ll. 3105-3116)

The bishop advises her to convince Partonope to force light upon Melior. Light, as in the case of Saint Agnes, carries here the Christian symbolism of a force fighting darkness, good banishing evil, and Melior is indeed suspected of being a malicious fiend, or a monster. Yet, as in the saint legend, light has here a second meaning, because it is aimed to expose also Melior's physical form and by doing so to put an end to Melior's conditions for the relation she has with Partonope, and impose the rules represented by the bishop and the mother, that is social rules. Partonope, as a man and a knight, should not succumb to neither tricks nor conditions commanded by a woman once promises of marriage are made. Thus both the mother and the bishop advise him against her and her magic – as did the people in the *Life of Saint Agnes*, because Melior uses it to control Partonope, depriving him of control. He needs to reassert his strength as a man, and as a knight, he is also worried that she indeed might be monstrous, or simply plainly ugly, and the genuine curiosity about her looks, combined with his need to reclaim agency, make him decide to follow his mother's advice.

He takes a magical lantern with him, a light that cannot be extinguished by any natural means, and hides it in the chamber she visits him in. Once Melior appears in the room, he takes the lantern out:

> [o]ute of the Chambre voydyd the light / And ther wyth come his lady bryght / Alle naked to bedde fast She dyd hye / And to her loue She drawe ryght nye / When naked hir felt Partonope / The Clothes from hym tho ferre Throw he / His lantren he put vp wyth his lyght / Alle naked there had he the syght / Of the fayrest shapen creature / That euer was foordened thorow nature.
>
> (*PB*, ll. 3146-3155)

By uncovering her, he symbolically dominates her, doing exactly what the persecutors of Agnes intended by exposing her nakedness in public. Melior, however, has no more mantles to hide in, no hair grows to cover her as it was the darkness around them which was to serve that purpose, as Agnes' hair so was Melior's darkness a statement of her supernatural power. Not necessarily of magic itself, as she cast more explicit spells such as the illusion of a boar Partonope chased, or the magical boat. Rather, it was a symbol of her supernatural power as the enchantress, whose command ruled the world she herself constructed by not only conjuring the place and determining the conditions of love meetings, but also constantly reminding Partonope that he is, in fact, her subject (as would be his fate in *Romans of Partenay*).

What is also uncovered the moment she is deprived of the veil of darkness is the physicality of her wishes, her desire. Following Saunders (2007: 44) in concluding that "once she [Melior] succumbed to desire, she succumbs too to the traditional gender balance", I argue that this shame Melior laments is proof that she lost her supernatural status of the fairy enchantress because her spell of concealment and seduction was countered with the penetrating light of Partonope's power over her. The allure and seduction which belong "to the 'crafte' of enchantment rather than the traditional order of marriage" (Saunders 2007: 44) are evidence that Melior's power extended only in the realm she herself constructed, and upon its magic being broken she indeed needs to subject herself to rules of a world in which bishops, old mothers, and men, rule the lives of young women like herself. In other words, as Saint Agnes who despite being a champion of God had to succumb to the rules of the society she lived in with all its pagan cruelty, so does Melior, a woman relying on her uncanny abilities to secure her happiness, needs to admit defeat in the face of social norms she can no longer evade. *Partonope of Blois* does not, then, in the end distinguish strongly between the two types of magic used by Melior and Partonope's mother in terms of their natural or demonic origin. While the mother's magic is condemned by Partonope himself who: "syghed he wepyd petevusly / His moder he cursed to spitefully / The archebysshop and eke his sermoun / And praeth God they bothe moun / Haue myschaunce or that they dye" (*PB*, ll. 3362-3366), and her magic fails in the sense that love conquers all and her son and Melior are eventually reunited, this is not at all the focus of the story. Instead, the climactic moment of the subjection of Melior to the light of the lantern, when her protective and magical veil of darkness is defeated by Partonope's light is what signifies his victory over her and forms the central message of the story: "[e]che woman may Ensample take / ffor fayre wordys men Conne well make / **Ynow tylle they haue alle her lust** / **Her love they conne neuer after trust** / But besy hem tyll they haue a new" (*PB*, ll. 3306-3310). Women and their lust should be kept in check and Melior, losing her supernatural qualities, is left with being "only" a woman. And so as the

supernatural wives when losing their mantles of sealskin or fish scale need to conform with the rules of their husbands' world, so does Melior need to conform to the world of Partonope, his mother, and the bishop. The romance ends with the couple's pointedly non-supernatural wedding and wedding night.

Both *Life of Saint Agnes*, and *Partonope of Blois* are illustrations of medieval approaches to female magic. In both stories, as in other tales of uncanny women, the qualities they possess go from a peak of power and domination, to defeat, subjection, or neutralization, in the case of Agnes leading to her sanctification, for Melior to a happy marriage. While the consequences of such loss of magical powers vary depending on the text, and the stories discussed above show two such very different outcomes, the fate that invariably awaits a supernatural woman is to find herself ultimately tamed. Representing the uncontrollable forces of the supernatural, mysterious and unpredictable, women needed to fit into the medieval ideals of society as much, as they needed to fit ideas on women. Civilization, order, and rules of power required that women comply and do not threaten their foundations that are the rational and intellectual leadership of men. Embodying the wilderness, uncontrolled female supernatural powers present chaos with power over order which, for the well-being of both men and women in the same society, must be defended. This is, however, not to say that either socio-political, moral, or scientific medieval theories were in any ways explicitly or maliciously misogynous. The arguments presented here are rather intended to imply that in fact, while indeed the uncanny in women needs to be tamed and, as the title of this article playfully suggests, torn away as a seductive veil attracting attention to the woman covered with it, medieval texts admitted, cherished, and marvelled at the same qualities of women which were necessarily to be eventually taken away for the sake of cultural propriety and social order.

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