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THE VIRGIN AND THE BASILISK - A STUDY OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN AND THEIR SOCIAL ROLES IN IACOPONE DA TODI'S (1230/36-1306) *LAUDE*.¹

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During his lifetime, the Franciscan Iacopone da Todi (1230/36-1306) wrote a number of poems now known under the collective name of *Laude*. Influenced by different literary styles, such as Sicilian-Tuscan and differentiating itself from the Franciscan literary production of its time, Iacopone's *Laude* discuss both religious and secular matters.² This article is a study of the collection and the information for the modern reader about urban Italian women and their social roles in the thirteenth century, focusing on the following research questions:

- What are women's different social roles according to the *Laude*? How are these roles constructed and described?
- In what ways does a study of the *Laude* help the historian to understand the ambivalent relation(s) within and between women's roles in medieval society?

Historiography

Italian scholars writing during the second half of the twentieth century studied the *Laude* in order to answer questions of theological and literary character. Alvaro Bizzicari's article on the concept of mystical love in the *Laude*, Franco Mancini's focus on the variety of themes discussed by Iacopone and Elena Landoni's study of the different literary styles that can be found in the *Laude* are but a few examples of this tendency.³ Even though much of the (Italian) scholarly interest for Iacopone da Todi has focused on subjects related to theology and literature, in recent years both Italian and international scholars have started to analyse other aspects of the texts. From Leonard J. Bruce-Chwatt's focus on the history of medicine to Louise Katainen's and Paolo Canettieri's comparative approach to the *Laude*, Iacopone's writings have been subject to a scrutiny that goes beyond theology and literature.⁴ In addition, scholars have started to suggest different theories and methods through which the *Laude* can be studied and understood. Katainen's call for the use of both historical and

¹ This study was originally presented as a Masters thesis at the University of Malmo, Sweden. The author would thus like to thank Associate Professor Thomas Småberg and Professor Bodil Liljefors Persson for their precious advice.

² Cfr. Iacopone da Todi (a), *Laude*, with a commentary by Franco Mancini (Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1974)p.448 and Paolo Canettieri, *Iacopone da Todi e la poesia religiosa del Duecento* (Libri S.p.A, 2001) p.23-4; p.26.

³ Cfr. Alvaro, Bizzicari, 'L'amore mistico nel canzoniere di Jacopone da Todi', *Italica*, 45 (1968), Da Todi(a),*Laude*, and Elena Landoni, 'Iacopone da Todi e la trasgressione del linguaggio cortese', in *Il "libro" e la "sentenza". Scrittura e significato nella poesia medievale: Iacopone da Todi, Dante, Cecco Angiolieri* (Vita e Pensiero, 1990).

⁴ Leonard J. Bruce-Chwatt, 'Jacopone da Todi's mystical pathology', in *British Medical Journal*, 285 (1982) 1803-4; Louise V. Katainen, 'Sharing the Passion: Jacopone da Todi's "Donna del Paradiso" and James Weldon Johnsons "The Crucifixion"' in *Medieval Perspectives*, 7 (1992) p.108; Canettieri, 'Iacopone da Todi'.

feminist perspectives on the study of *Laude*, together with Alessandro Vettori's campaign for the use of new interpretative perspectives, are of particular importance in relation to the present article⁵. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the lack of focus on the women described by Iacopone. This absence has in part been mentioned by Matteo Leonardi in his edition of *Laude* from 2010. Here, he stresses the importance of femininity in relation to both Iacopone's personal mystical experience and his poems. However, Leonardi does not develop his study of femininity in *Laude* choosing to focus, among other things, on the possible recipients of the text.⁶ Finally, during the past decades a conspicuous amount has been written about medieval women and only a handful of these studies are mentioned in this article. Scholars of medieval women have concentrated on a variety of themes and sources, such as gendered language and medieval law respectively, maintaining a focus that is both scholarly and political at the same time.⁷ Investigations of medieval women's sexual status, the negotiation of their roles within marriage and the household, together with the influence of (female) devotion are of particular relevance for this study.⁸ At the same time, however, the present article focuses on the ambivalence that can be found in relation to the different roles, thus shifting the emphasis from roles themselves to the contrasts among and within them.

Theory and Method

The study and interpretation of the *Laude* presented in this article is based on Joan Scott's definition of gender as an analytical category, through which I will be able to analyse the different roles of women as described by Iacopone. Following the first part of Scott's definition and its subsets, it will be possible to elucidate the different kinds of (dichotomic) symbols that can be found in Iacopone's description of women, together with the normative concepts and the number of interpretations they allow.⁹ In a similar way, thanks to Scott's focus on the role of social organisations and subjective identities, it will be possible to investigate the connection between Iacopone's descriptions of women and contemporary institutions and organizations, such as the Church and Franciscan movement.¹⁰ When it comes to an analysis of the ambivalence between and among women's different roles in *Laude*, the definition of gender as a signifier of power will be used to enlighten those

⁵ Louise V. Katainen, 'Jacopone da Todi, Poet and Mystic: A Review of the History of the Criticism' in *Mystics Quartely*, 22, No.2 (1996) pp.52-4; Alessandro Vettori, *La vita e l'opera di Iacopone da Todi. Atti del convegno di studio. Todi, 3-7 dicembre 2006* in *The Catholic Historical Review* 10 (2009) pp.803-4

⁶ Iacopone da Todi(b), *Laude*, commented by Matteo Leonardi (Leo S. Olschki, 2010) pp. x-xi; pp. xvi-xvii; pp. xxi;xxiii; pp.L-LI.

⁷ Judith M. Bennet et al. 'Women, Gender and Medieval Historians' in Judith M. Bennet and Ruth Mazo Karras (eds) *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p.1, p.7, p.14.

⁸ See for example: Dyan Elliott, 'Gender and the Christian Traditions' in Bennet and Karras 'Women and Gender'; Janet L. Nelson et.al, 'Women and Laws in Early Medieval Europe', in Bennet and Karras 'Women and Gender'; Susan Mosher Stuard, 'Brideprice, Dowry, and Other Marital Assigns' in Bennet and Karras 'Women and Gender'; Sara McDougall, 'Women adn Gender in Canon Law' in Bennet and Karras 'Women and Gender'; Miri Rubin, 'Cults of Saints' in Bennet and Karras 'Women and Gender'.

⁹ Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' in *Gender and the Politics of History* (Colombia University Press,1999), p.42-3.

¹⁰ Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis',p.43-4.

(gendered) relationship of power connected to each and every role.¹¹ During the past years, the use of gender as a category of historical analysis has been met with concern, since it tends to be used regardless of different places and cultural contexts.¹² In order to elucidate the relationship between gendered representations of women's role and their context, this article relies on the use of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA). Fairclough's focus on text production, distribution and consumption, together with an analysis of the relation between (written) texts, social practices and the order of discourses can be helpful in outlining the ways in which different discourse and social contexts have come to influence the descriptions of women in the *Laude*.¹³ Furthermore, the meeting between different orders of discourse might be connected to the ambivalences found in the text. Orders of discourses with a religious and/or secular origin might, in other words, be present in the *Laude*, reshaping each other's boundaries and, at the same time, creating dichotomic, multifaceted and ambivalent descriptions of women.

The Virgin and the Basilisk- Women's Roles and their Ambivalences

The following section will present and discuss the different roles of women found in Iacopone da Todi's *Laude*. Furthermore, this part of the article will also enlighten the ambivalences within the different roles. The ambivalences that can be found between the different roles will be discussed in the coming section.¹⁴

Woman as Bride

The relation between bride and groom is often described in *Laude*, both on a practical and a metaphorical level. In many of Iacopone's poems, the soul is described as the bride of Christ. In order to become worthy of such a groom, however, the soul has to possess a number of virtues:

28

La corte 'o se fo queste nozze sì è questa eclesia santa;
 Tu veni a llei obedente et ella de fede t'amanta;
 [...]
 Loco se fa nova canta, ché l'alma per fede è sponsata

*Holy Mother Church is the hall for the wedding. Enter by the door of obedience and be mantled with faith, [...] Sing a new song for the bride now wedded in faith*¹⁵

¹¹ Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', p.43-5;

¹² See for example: Jeanne Boydston, 'Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis', in *Gender and History*, 20, No.3 (2008), p.559.

¹³ Norman Fairclough, 'Language and Ideology', in *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Critical Study of Language*, Pearson Education Limited, 2010) pp. 58-9; more about orders of discourse in Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, (Gallimard, 1971), pp.38-9; Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (Pantheon Books, 1972), p.209.

¹⁴ The analysed poems are taken from: da Todi(b), *Laude*; for the English translation see: Jacopone da Todi, *The Lauds*, trans. Serge och Elizabeth Hughes (Paulist Press, 1982); the poems have been studied in their entirety and in their original language.

¹⁵ da Todi, 'Lauds', p.159.

60

De prudenza adórnate, alma, se vòl' salire,
[...]
Andar composta e savia, co' sse dé' convenire
[...]
Se tu nuda gèssice, siri' morta e confusa;
La iustizia vèstete la sua veste ioiosa,
[...]

*Deck yourself with prudence, Soul [...] And prepare you, bride of quiet wisdom, [...] Come to the gate
naked and forlorn And only death and confusion will great you; Put on the joyous mantle of justice,
[...]*¹⁶

Moral qualities, expressed through the metaphor of clothes, seem thus to be of pivotal importance for the soul/bride. Furthermore, the following poem sheds light on the role of candour:

72

Sèrvate ben lavata,
Lo tuo volto sia netto,
Che non si' arenonciata
E fàttote desonore.
Alma, non t'è bastanta
Pur sola una gunnella;
Se non ci ài plu adornanza,
Ià non ce parrai bella;
Nell'altre vertute avanza,
Che te dian bel colore.¹⁷

*Guard the candor of your image That you be not dishonored and cast aside. One gown, remember, will
not suffice; Enhance your comeliness with others And you will be resplendent. You must robe yourself
with virtues- With all the virtues, lacking none. Hasten, then, to make them your.*¹⁸

On the other hand, however, the relation between Christ/groom and the soul/bride does not follow the same patterns as marriages between human beings, something that is stressed in poems n.50 and 86. The former is based on the biblical allegory which portrays a lover searching for a lost partner. In this poem, the soul/bride has abandoned Christ/groom, who mourns. He describes how He gave the soul both love and jewels in order for it to honour

¹⁶ da Todi, 'Lauds', 131-2.

¹⁷ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.154.

¹⁸ da Todi, 'Lauds', s.134.

Him. Christ/groom then wants the soul, whose face now lies in filth, to come back to Him.¹⁹ In a similar way, the benevolence of Christ towards the soul is expressed by poem n.86, this time through a discussion of a wedding dowry. According to the soul, it is the bride who provides a dowry to her husband before the wedding. The opposite should only happen when the status of the groom would be enhanced by marriage to a woman with a higher social position.²⁰ These poems, then, seem to reflect a number of medieval phenomena: first of all, the increased importance in Southern Europe of the bride's dowry, at the same time as the husband's morning-gift declined.²¹ Furthermore, poem n.86 seem to show that marrying men of lower rank might have been a common alternative for many noble women.²² Since Christ/groom provides love and jewels for the soul/bride, while lowering his own status through marriage, the metaphorical relation between the two seems to be based on a conception of the marriage contract that is opposite to the one used in medieval society. The importance of status, however, is discussed from a practical point of view as well:

44

S'el re de Francia avesse figliola
 Et ella sola en sua redetate,
 Giria adornata de blanca stola
 (en sua fama vola en onne contrate)
 S'ella en viltate entendesse e 'n malsano
 E dèsseise en mano a ssé possedere,
 Que porria om dire de questa trattato? ²³

*Were the only daughter of the king of France , beloved of all, Fairest of the fair , draped in the white stole of royalty, To fall from her station and give herself to someone unworthy, What would you think of that?*²⁴

Again, poem 44 mentions the possibility for a noble woman to marry a man of lower status. At the same time, however, the poem shows how the marriage of an heiress was not a matter of personal choice, but rather of careful planning.²⁵ Furthermore, if status plays an important role in medieval marriage contracts, so do the physical qualities of the bride-to-be. According to the description of a desirable bride in poem n.58 a girl should, among other things, be beautiful, healthy, from the own kin, quiet, gentle and possessing a conspicuous dowry.²⁶ Even though physical beauty might not have been one of the most important

¹⁹ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.104.

²⁰ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p. 188-9;

²¹ Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500*, (Longman Pearson Education, 2002), p.40; for a discussion of dowries see also: Mosher Stuard, 'Brideprice', p.149.

²² Ward, 'Women in Medieval Europe', p. 36.

²³ da Todi(b), *Laude* s.90.

²⁴ da Todi, 'Lauds', s.129.

²⁵ Ward, 'Women in Medieval Europe', p.23; see also Nelson, 'Women and Laws', pp.107-8.

²⁶ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.123-4.

parameters when planning a marriage, Iacopone does nevertheless stress its importance.²⁷ Interestingly enough, however, the moral qualities that seemed to be central for the soul/bride, do not seem to play any important role in relation to real brides. This might therefore be seen as an obvious contrast within women's role as bride. Even though many poems concentrate on the relation between the soul and Christ, in the *Laude* the role of bride and groom is interpreted by other beings as well. In poem n.2, the Cross becomes the bride of a believing brother.²⁸ In poem n.18, the soul is the bride of love. The latter does not want to satisfy the former and the soul replays by asking if a rich man would be honoured by a wife who is forced to beg.²⁹ From the previous presentation of Iacopone's poems, it is possible to come to the following conclusions. First of all, clothes and nakedness seem to function as (dichotomic) cultural symbols, together with cleanness and dirt. The importance of dowry and a woman's dependent status after marriage can be seen as the normative concepts influencing the texts. As a consequence, then, a groom providing a dowry and an heiress marrying someone of much lower status are seen as unusual phenomena. Other normative concepts can be seen in the description of a desirable bride, who is expected to be beautiful, healthy and from the own kin. When it comes to the role of different organisations and their possible influence on Iacopone's own identity, CDA enlightens a number of orders of discourses that meet each other in *Laude*. The presence of ecclesiastic and mystical-religious discourses is probably not surprising.³⁰ At the same time, however, Iacopone makes use of terms taken from the troubadour tradition and from the world of jurisprudence.³¹ In a similar way, the text shows discourses taken from the world of aristocracy.³² Through their interaction in *Laude*, these different discourses seem to create the role of a bride through the use of dichotomies which, in turn, represent the moral qualities a women should possess. Ambivalently enough, moral qualities seem to be necessary only in relation to a metaphorical bride, while in real life a proper bride is characterized by her physical qualities and social status. Other practical benefits, such as a conspicuous dowry to give her husband and the possibility to enhance his status after marriage are also considered important. Even though marriage implied dependence on a husband, this status could be used by women in order to subvert (gendered) relationship of powers. As poem n.18 shows, a wife leaving in an unworthy condition would decrease the reputation of her husband, probably as much as her status would increase his through marriage. Woman's submission to a husband is, thus, an ambivalent concept, something that will be shown in the following section as well.

Women within the Family

A number of poems in *Laude* concentrate on women's relation to, and responsibility towards, their family. I have therefore decided to include wives, mothers, daughters- in- law and widows in the same category.

²⁷ Ward, 'Women in Medieval Europe', p. 35.

²⁸ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.9.

²⁹ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.41.

³⁰ See for example poems n.18, 28, 50, 60, 86 in da Todi(b), *Laude*.

³¹ See for example poems n.2, 18 Iacopone da Todi(b), *Laude*.

³² Poem n..44, da Todi(b), *Laude*.

The creation of marriage and the role of wives is discussed in poems n.3 and n.46, according to which a wife is a remedy against the temptations of the flesh, while the reproductive role of husband and wife seems similar to the different duties of priests, judges and doctors.³³ The plight of begetting children, however, implies difficulties and sorrows for women, as explained by the autobiographical poem n.58:

58
 Mea mate stava assai mala mente
 Del parto del vente, che fo molto amaro.
 [...]

 Se mamma arvenesse, che recontasse
 Che le pene che trasse en meo notrire!
 [...]

 O mamma mea, ès(t)o le scorte
 Ch'en una notte ài guadagnato;
 Portar novi misi ventrata s'i forte
 Con molte bistorte e gran dolorato,
 Parto penato e pena en notrire;
 El meritire, mal n' èi pagata ³⁴
 [...]

*My mother was exhausted and in agony: Mine was a hard birth. [...]. If my mother were to come back and tell What it cost her to feed me! [...]O mother of mine, the price you paid for one night! Nine months so heavily burdened, The doubled up in pain, The birth itself, and the exhausting feedings- Was that an adequate recompense? [...]*³⁵

The reasons for this sufferance are to find, according to Iacopone, in the night during which the child was conceived. It is thus the sexual act that results in years of unjust pain.³⁶ The negative connotation of sexual acts is further confirmed by poem n.32, where the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception are described with wonder, since no woman has ever before become pregnant without any corruption of the body.³⁷ Although sexual intercourse is necessary in order for husband and wife to fulfil their reproductive plights, the act is what corrupts women and condemns them to years of pain. Even more ambivalently, while marriage is created in order to protect men from temptation, it is also what forces women into an automatic corruption of the body. This ambivalence shown in the *Laude* might be connected to the medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary, which focused on her status as a virgin mother untouched by sin. This widespread devotion, however, did not contribute to improve women's status within contemporary society.³⁸ At the same time, this ambivalence

³³ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.96; more about Christian marriage in McDougall, 'Women in Canon Law', pp.164-171.

³⁴ da Todi(b), *Laude* s.123-4.

³⁵ da Todi, 'Lauds', s.109-11.

³⁶ Laviola, 'Jungfrun och Basilisken', p.44.

³⁷ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.66.

³⁸ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate. A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, (Routledge, 2003), p.32-3.

should not be seen as an impossible barrier to the negotiation of relationships of power within the family. Poem n.57 can be used to further explain this statement. The narrators of the poem are two men talking about their daughters-in-law. The first one explains how well his female relative takes care of him, while the second man describes the bad manners of his own daughter-in-law, which make him prefer death to the constant humiliation:

57

<<Aio una nora santa,
De paradiso planta;
Certo eo siria morto,
Se non fuss'el suo conforto!
Tutto me va lavanno
E sceglienno e nettanno;
Si la benedica Deo,
Co' ell'è riposo meo!>>

[...]

Aio una nor'astuta
Co la lengua forcuta,
Con una voce enquina,
Che non ci arman vecina,
Che non oda 'l gridato
De quel suo morganato.

[...]

Meglio sira la morte
Ca la pena s'è forte!

Aio un figlio ordenato, che Deo l'ha fabrecato;

[...]

A la mogli à firitto
Per quel che n'è sentito;
Nulla cosa ce iova,
tant'è de dura prova>>

[...]

<<[...]

E cento plu à tu peio,
C'ài mal senza remeio,
Cà passa onne malizia
Ria femena en nequizia.
Non t'encresca a contare
(ché'n me pòi resanare)

Le parole dogliose
En plu che venenose,
Ch'èsta tua nora dice,
Che Deo la mmaledice>>

<<[...]

Or so' cum avilato
 De una mercennara,
 Figlia de tavernara!
 Co la lengua demustra
 Che m' à vénto de iotra;
 Fatto à cantuzìo
 De lo meo repotio:
 [...] >>³⁹

"But God be praised, for my daughter-in-law Is a jewel of jewels, a gift from Heaven. Without her I would long ago have been dead; She washes, de-lices, changes me- God bless her, my joy." [...] "My daughter-in-law is a clever shrew. From early morning her forked tongue And braying speech inform the neighborhood Of every quarrel under our roof [...] Whenever it comes, Death will be kind. [...] "My son, by comparison, a gift of God [...] Sometimes he beats her for the way she treats me, But notning helps; she's got a thick hide." [...] Now I see you are a hundred times worse off. Is there anything more frightening Than a vicious woman? May God in His justice damn her to Hell!" [...] Now I've become the favorite target For the insult of money-grubbing tavern slut. Her tongue, a jousting lance, unhorses me; She loves to humiliate me, time after time. [...]"⁴⁰

Interestingly enough, a discussion of the moral qualities of the first daughter-in-law and of her caretaking role towards the narrator seem to make a physical description of her unnecessary. That is obviously not the case with the second daughter-in-law: her lack of manners and respect in relation to (male) relatives seems to be connected to a number of descriptions of her physical qualities and social status. The two daughters-in-law described by poem n.57 could be interpreted as two dichotomic cultural symbols, describing desirable moral qualities and unacceptable behaviours. The well-mannered woman does not need any bodily descriptions, while the physical qualities and social status of her counterpart are mentioned in detail. These two dichotomic symbols can be related to normative concepts contemporary to Iacopone. Women are expected to take care of (male) relatives and a hypothetical failure to do that results in a challenge to the world order. The same profane and sacred order of things seems to lay the foundations for the institution of marriage. The plights of husband and wives are comparable to those of doctors and judges as shown by poem n.46 where marriage assumes a theological importance when preventing men from falling offer for temptations. These normative concepts, both religious and secular in character, can be further analysed in connection to the cultural symbols of the mother and the Virgin Mary, in poem 58 and 32 respectively. Here, the troubles of the earthly mother are seen as a consequence of conceiving, which defiles women's bodies with sin. The Virgin Mary, although a mother, is not touched by bodily corruption and is thus still pure.⁴¹ Finally, Iacopone uses widows as a metaphor for the Church in poem n.35. Here, the Church is described first as mother abandoned by her kin and surrounded by coward, bastard sons,

³⁹ da Todi(b), *Laude*, s.120.

⁴⁰ da Todi, 'Lauds', s.106-7;

⁴¹ Matteo Leonardi offers an interesting interpretation of the sorrow of the Holy Mother as something through which God and humanity are united .See da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.148; Laviola, 'Jungfrun och Basilisken', p.46;

then as a lonely widow. The whole poem has been interpreted as critique to the contemporary struggles within the Franciscan order.⁴² This description of the Church as a mother and widow could be seen as the result of an order of discourse originated within an ecclesiastical context. In addition, if one chooses to interpret poem n.35 as a critique towards internal struggles within the Franciscan order, it would then be possible to elucidate the influence of both an ecclesiastic and a Franciscan order of discourses. From the previous presentation and discussion it is then possible to reach the following conclusions. First of all, the role of women within the family is constructed in relation to (male) relatives. The function of wives is that of a remedy against men's temptations; the daughters-in-law in poem n. 57 are described in relation to their behaviour towards the men of the household; mothers and their pain are connected to their children, while the afflictions of widow are caused by a lack of (male) relatives. The main ambivalences can be found in relation to the descriptions of mothers and of the two daughters-in-law. Although childbirth could be seen as the fulfilment of the plight connected to marriage, it is this same fulfilment that corrupts women with sin. In a similar manner, the unacceptable behaviour of the second daughter-in-law is connected to both her physical qualities and social status. Finally, women's relation to (male) relatives should not only be seen as the starting point for the construction of their roles within the family. To the contrary, as poem n.57 shows, women's behaviour towards the men of the household is a factor that can challenge the (gendered) relationships of power, since the reputation of a man is directly related to the wife and her lifestyle within the household.⁴³

Women within Religious Orders

While most women became brides, wives, mothers and, finally, widows, others decided to join different religious orders. In some cases, the two choices would not mutually exclude each other, as the following dialogue between the Deil and Saint Francis of Assisi shows:

71

<<Molta gente me torrai
Cun questo ordene che fai;
Le femene me lassarai,
Ché non n'é bon mesticato!>>

[...]

Fatt'ho ordene i sorelle,
De le quel' sì guerriato>>

[...]

<<Ne la Valle spoletana
Una vergen c'é soprana,
Clara de donna Ortulana,
Tempio de Deo consecrato>>.

<<Quilli che so' coniogati
Non sirò de star coi frati;

⁴² da Todi(b), *Laude*, pp.70-1

⁴³ Ward, 'Women in Medieval Europe', p.66;

Sirò da te allecerati
 Avèroli so' meo guidato>>
 <<Et eo te voglio fare afflitto,
 Uno ordene aio eletto,
 Penetenti, Orden deritto,
 En matrimonio derizzato>>⁴⁴

"I fear your tactics: with this Order of yours You will take many souls away from me. At least leave me the women Your friars shouldn't be mixing with them" "[...] I have founded an order of sisters, And they too will wage war on you" [...] "In the Valley of Spoleto lives a virgin, Of sovereign virtue, a temple consecrated to the Lord, Clare, the daughter of Donna Ortolana" " Married people should not mix with friars and nuns- You can let them go, leave them under my patronage." "I will trouble you even more: I have founded an order for married penitents."⁴⁵

Poem 71 obviously reflects the creation of the orders of penitents, which accepted women as well as married people.⁴⁶ When it comes to Iacopone's description of Saint Clare, it is interesting to note its focus on Clare's moral qualities and origin, while bodily details are left unknown. That is not the case with poem n.37, where the soul of a nun condemned to hell speaks to a living friar. The nun tells about her life, about how she for more than thirty years castigated her body through silence, fast and penance. This was not endured out of devotion, but rather out of pride and in order to gain the praise of other people. Because of the different restrictions of the body, while in life the nun felt tempted by every man. Now, in death, she is married to the Devil, even though she had promised to become the bride of Christ.⁴⁷ The nun of the poem, together with her lack of devotion, serves as a denouncement of hypocrites within the Church.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, Iacopone's words reflect a time during which (noble) women often became nuns for practical, rather than religious, reasons. Convents offered independence from marriage and the possibility for women to become educated; furthermore, taking the veil required a less conspicuous dowry than the one needed for a suitable marriage; yet another option was joining the convent as a widow.⁴⁹ From a theoretical perspective, Saint Clare and the nun can be seen as two dichotomic cultural symbols, representing sincere vocation and false devotion respectively. The normative concepts represented in the two poems consider the intention of the souls to be more important than bodily behaviour. At the same time, however, Iacopone seems to pay a great amount of attention to bodily descriptions of the wicked nun, while dedicating a few verses to the moral qualities of Saint Clare. A similar proportion, where physical traits are described only in relation to unacceptable behaviours and ignored in connection to (admirable) moral qualities and good manners, is reminiscent of the two daughters-in-law described in the previous section. In addition, as with the two women of poem n.57, the symbols of Saint Clare and of the wicked nun are constructed in connection to different male

⁴⁴ da Todi(b), *Laude*, s.152

⁴⁵ da Todi, 'Lauds', s.192

⁴⁶ Ward, 'Women in Medieval Europe', p. 154; 179;

⁴⁷ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.76;

⁴⁸ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.75;

⁴⁹Cfr. Shahar, "The Fourth Estate", p.5,8 and Ward, 'Women in Medieval Europe', p. 161-2;

figures. The blessed woman is described as a temple of God, at the same time as the poem stresses her connection to Saint Francis and the Franciscan order(s), together with her antagonism towards the Devil. The nun of poem n.37, on the other hand, became married to the Devil because of her poor conduct in life. When it comes to the orders of discourse that can be found in these poems, it is easy to recognize the importance and influence that the Franciscan order(s) had on Iacopone. Orders of discourse with a theological and biblical origin can also be identified in the poems.⁵⁰ Throughout the discussed poems, the role of religious women is constructed in relation to a number of (male) figures and through a dichotomy between admirable moral qualities and bodily practices connected to wicked behaviours. The poems seem to enlighten women's ambivalent relation to monasticism, since not all of them choose to become nuns out of sincere vocation. Regrettably enough, the *Laude's* descriptions of women within religious orders can be said to be meagre, especially if compared to those about women within the family. For example, the two poems do not elucidate different (gendered) relationships of power nor an eventual struggle in order to subvert them.

Women as temptation

When it comes women and the role they play in tempting men, poem n.45 provides a detailed description of the subject. Here, the devices used by women in order to attract the attention of men are enumerated and commented upon. According to Iacopone, women are prepared to change their image in order to obtain whatever they want. A short woman can become taller thanks to soles hidden concealed under a long dress; pale complexions can become red, while dark ones can turn fair; hair is versatile as well and, if needed, women can choose to wear braids that are not their own.⁵¹ Women are considered to be worse than the basilisk since the latter, although lethal, hides away from people. Women, on the other hand, move around freely, tempting men with their glances. Since they lead men to sin, Iacopone describes women as the servants of the Devil stressing, however, that their behaviour will not go unpunished. An apparently cuckolded man will suspect his wife of cheating, finally killing her out of jealousy.⁵² Women's sinful nature is presented once more in poem n.84 although on a metaphorical level. Here, mortal sins such as Sloth, Lust and Voluptuousness are given female shape, even though it is Iacopone himself who, towards the end of the poem, acquires a feminine character and becomes the bride of Christ.⁵³ Associating women with negative qualities was a common phenomenon in medieval literature, which often described pride, promiscuity and vanity as characteristic for women.⁵⁴ Although there is great focus on the sinfulness of women, the men described in the *Laude* are not exonerated from taking responsibility for their own behaviour. Poem n.7 criticises (lustful) thoughts about women; poem n.62 describes a manipulative man who makes advances to women and, when they refuse him, goes about destroying their reputation; finally, in poem n.63, the Devil tries to claim the soul of a man who tempted both women and young people through

⁵⁰da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.75,p.150-1; Laviola, 'Jungfrun och Basilisken', p.56

⁵¹ A further discussion of the relation between women and clothing can be found in: Katherine L. French, "Genders and Material Culture" in Bennet and Karras 'Women and Gender', pp.198-201.

⁵² da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.91-2

⁵³ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.182.

⁵⁴ Shahaar, "The Fourth Estate", p.3.

the use of songs and music.⁵⁵ According to this summary, it would be tempting to conclude that Iacopone focuses on the sinful nature of women while recognising men's own responsibilities in relation to temptation. The matter, however, is far more complex. At first sight, the dichotomic cultural symbols that can be found in these poems are those of the tempting woman and of the tempted man. However, a closer analysis of the material shows that the two symbols are themselves in turn constructed through the use of dichotomies. The first symbol can be seen as composed by the sinful woman and her (dichotomic) counterpart, represented by a woman that either resists or becomes an offer for male manipulation (poem 62 and 63 respectively). In a similar way, it is possible to find two different figures connected to the description of men. First, there is the tempting one, who looks or speaks to women with lustful purposes. The other male figure that can be found in the poems is that of the (apparently) cuckolded man, who is subject to jealousy and violence because of his wife's behaviour. It might be possible to say that these four cultural symbols represent balanced relations between men and women when it comes to temptation, since the poems condemn and punish both tempting women and tempting men. Even though the four symbols can be found in the *Laude*, this interpretation does not seem to be supported by the analysed poems. Although tempting others is considered unacceptable, Iacopone does not seem to openly exempt women from any responsibility when it comes to men's lustful thoughts and behaviour. In other words, while men are considered to be offer for women's tempting devices, the innocence of women is not described explicitly in any of the poems. In addition to this conclusion, it might be useful to point out that Iacopone justifies the violent and deadly reaction of the (apparently) cuckolded husband in poem n.45. In other words, the interpretation of the different cultural symbols seems to be based on normative concepts that create a binary relation between women and men, associating the former with temptation and the latter with the use of violence (among other things). When it comes to the different orders of discourses that might have influenced Iacopone's descriptions, it is possible to find mystical-ascetical one in poems n.45, 62 and 84, while a juridical one is present in poem n.63.⁵⁶ Finally, when it comes to the role of women as temptation, its constructions and the ambivalence that can be found within it, it is possible to come to the following conclusions. First of all, the construction of this role seems to be based on the relation between the tempting woman and the male figures she comes in contact with. Among these it is possible to mention characters from a religious sphere, such as the Devil mentioned in poem n.45. In a similar way, bodily descriptions are of pivotal importance for the construction of the tempting woman. Women's sinful nature seems to be present in every encounter between the sexes, although in a more or less explicit way. Thus, it is possible to conclude that women's role as temptation is the one presenting the least apparent ambivalences, even though women in this category appear to have both the freedom and the possibility to influence the relationships of power around them.

The Virgin and the Basilisk-Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to investigate women's different social roles according to Iacopone da Todi's *Laude*. The use of Scott's gender theory allows an analysis of the

⁵⁵ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.23; 132; 134.

⁵⁶ da Todi(b), *Laude*, p.90-1; 131; 178; Laviola, 'Jungfrun och Basilisken', p.65.

construction of women's roles, while pointing out the connection between power and gender. In a similar way, the focus of CDA on the interaction between the text and its context relates the different descriptions of women to Iacopone's world. Furthermore, this methodical framework sheds light on the encounter between different, sometimes opposite, currents of thoughts, thus giving the scholar the possibility to investigate its consequences. In other words, the combined use of Scott's gender theory contributes to a better understanding of the interaction between the *Laude* and its original context. In addition, this combination might reduce the anachronistic use of the term "gender", since the focus of the investigation then becomes not only gender, but also the context of the material and, indirectly, of the term itself. From the analysis of the material discussed above, it is possible to come to the following conclusions. The different social roles of women described in the *Laude* are those of bride, wife, mother, family caretaker and widow; roles within religious orders and as temptation. The description of these roles are constructed in similar ways, namely in relation to a number of male figures. The metaphorical use of women's role as bride connects her to biblical figures, while in reality it is the relation to the groom that defines the role; women within the family are discussed in relation to the presence of (male) relatives or lack therein; women within religious orders are also connected to male figures, although most of these are of a biblical nature; finally, a tempting woman is related to manipulative men and cuckolded ones. I have already examined the ambivalences that can be found within these roles in a previous section. Therefore, it is now time to elucidate the ambivalences between the different roles. As previously discussed, the analysis of the different roles shows that moral qualities are often subordinated to practical skills. Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of bodily qualities in relation to unruly behaviours and sinful situations, together with the lack of such descriptions in relation to moral qualities, connects the body with the realm of the unaccepted. According to this concept, it would be possible to elucidate a hierarchical and ambivalent relation between women's different roles. Righteous women within religious orders might then be placed at the top of the hierarchy, since they are close to God and their body has not been corrupted by sin. As a consequence, brides could be placed a step down the ladder because of their (temporary) physical purity. Brides would thus be standing above wives and mothers, who have already sinned, with tempting women on the last step of the ladder. The ambivalences shown by this hierarchy are obvious. Although mothers and wives are not physically untouched as most women in cloisters would be, the *Laude* describes the begetting of children as both a religious and secular role. Thus, women fulfilling different (religious) roles are ambivalently placed on different hierarchical levels. Furthermore, those roles that seem to show most internal ambivalences seem to be those with less opportunity to influence (gendered) relationships of power. For example, women within religious orders can sometimes present an ambivalent relation between the will of the mind and that of the body while, at the same time, they do not seem to be able to directly influence relationships of power (at least according to an analysis of the material). On the other hand, while women described as temptations seem to both have the freedom and the ability to affect different relationships of power, the role itself is less ambivalent in the sense that, according to Iacopone, women seem to be closely connected to the concept of temptation in every situation. Finally, these categories should not

be seen as static ones; rather, as the *Laude* shows, women could take on different roles, constantly (re)negotiating their possibilities and (gendered) relationships of power.

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