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I Am Woman: The Complicated Relationship between Fairy Mistresses, Virgin Martyrs, and the Medieval Patriarchy

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Katherine A. Haire entitled "I Am Woman: The Complicated Relationship between Fairy Mistresses, Virgin Martyrs, and the Medieval Patriarchy." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Roy M. Liuzza, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Dzon, Laura Howes

Accepted for the Council:

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I Am Woman: The Complicated Relationship between Fairy Mistresses, Virgin Martyrs, and the
Medieval Patriarchy

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Katherine Ann Haire
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Abstract

While modern scholars cannot expect medieval authors to live up to our expectations of feminism, we can still reflect upon the ways in which they both circumvented and upheld the typical patriarchal discursive structure which dominated the Middle Ages. A cross-genre examination of virgin martyred saints and fairy mistresses will illuminate significant overlap in the treatment of magic and divine intervention and the typical female portrayal in these circumstances. Saint's Lives and Medieval Romances occupy significantly distinct spaces in the popular literary consciousness of the High and Late Middle Ages; however, both genres offer moral instruction for the women who encounter these stories allowing for a meaningful comparison of the female tropes in each genre. Using Sandy Bardsley's distinction between power and authority from *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages*, in which "Power suggests the ability to effect a change...[and] Authority is defined as 'recognized and legitimized power,'" this project examines the extent to which virgin martyred saints and fairy mistresses are allowed power *and* authority in their respective texts (Bardsley 193). Through an examination of the *Katherine Group* virgin martyr saints' lives and the fairy mistresses of *Sir Launfal*, *Lanval*, and *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, this paper demonstrates that while Saints' Lives and Romances can depict powerful women, there is still a tendency to undermine women's authority; even when a woman has legitimized authority over her own power, an inexplicable source such as magic is used to justify that authority. I hope this paper will challenge traditional notions of women's power and authority in the well-trod tropes of virgin martyred saints and fairy mistresses.

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Introduction

The influence of mysterious, powerful female characters echoes throughout much of the literature from the Middle Ages. The ability of women to influence the people and events within texts has become a well-trod topic of recent scholarship though early medieval scholarship often ignored the important role that women played in common popular texts and female characters were often viewed only in a one-dimensional context, frequently as the object of male affection, or as a source of temptation or corruption for the more dynamic male characters. This is a tragically flawed way of examining women's roles in medieval literature. Of course, I am not arguing that these one-dimensional readings are completely unfounded. Quite the contrary, I acknowledge the difficulties that arise when trying to assign modern ideological terms, such as 'feminist', to medieval authors, and most would likely fall short if we attempted this; there is certainly a tendency for medieval authors to produce one-dimensional female characters which scholars are justified in highlighting.

The purpose of this study, however, is to examine instances of female agency in which authors both enable and undermine the power and authority ascribed to women. I will explore the extent to which women who are assigned agency in texts - specifically those in the roles of fairy mistress or virgin martyr - are allowed to attain power and maintain authority within their given story. I believe that the treatment of these two common tropes, found in medieval lais or romances and hagiography respectively, indicate the tendency for authors to attempt to limit female authority, even while it allows for demonstrable power. Religious women are able to gain more explicit power in the tangible world, only for them to lack total authority over that power; meanwhile, the fairy mistresses can still exert considerable power while also having more authority over that power. Through this comparative look at the power and authority of fairy

mistresses and virgin martyr saints, this paper will demonstrate how magic and religion simultaneously instill female characters with power effectively subverting typical societal expectations but ultimately undermine their authority, thus relenting to cultural pressures to keep women subordinate.

Power + Authority

‘Power’ and ‘authority’ are relatively vague words that are often thrown around in discussions of agency and dissections of character influence; however, in order to fully understand the distinction between the two and how they will relate to the field of gender studies, it is first necessary to outline the nuanced differences these terms represent. According to Sandy Bardsley, the differences between power and authority can be summed up as follows: “Power suggests the ability to effect a change, to get someone to do something that they would not otherwise do.... [and] Authority is defined as ‘recognized and legitimized power’”.¹ Bardsley’s distinction between power and authority effectively opens the door for individuals to demonstrate power without authority but makes it impossible to have authority without power. ‘Agency’ is therefore closely aligned with this understanding of power as it is recognized as the “ability or capacity to act or exert power” and does not seem to rely on the agent’s possession of authority.² This nuance complicates our view of female agency as it can make it easier for authors to nominally ascribe agency to a woman when she is truly just acting as an agent for a higher authority, instead of creating a female character who is only beholden unto herself and is able to exert *her* will over others. Many scholars have used these definitions to examine the historical agency that women were able to exert during the Middle Ages, but few attempt to

¹ Bardsley, Sandy. *Women’s Roles in the Middle Ages*. Greenwood Press, 2007. pp.193

² "agency, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/3851. Accessed 1 December 2020.

apply these understandings to texts. Previous historical analysis will help to inform this study's application to female characters and how a text's treatment of female characters may reflect on society's allowances for women.

The practice of examining women's power and authority is, of course, not limited to studies of the Middle Ages; Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo provides a broad context for gendered power studies as she plainly states, "Women may be important, powerful, and influential, but it seems that, relative to men of their age and social status, women everywhere lack generally recognized and culturally valued authority."³ This claim sums up most of the world's history and when applied to medieval gendered studies, it certainly rings true; the extent to which literature allows for a circumvention of these expectations will be further explored in this study. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski's examination of women's power in the Middle Ages acknowledges that power was typically viewed in the contexts of "law and force" leading power to be "equated with public authority."⁴ The tendency to limit the concept of 'power' to simply a legitimized display of public authority unnecessarily collapses the distinction between the two concepts and further negates the influence of those with power operating under a higher authority, a space into which women typically fall. Erler and Kowalski seek to distance themselves from this limiting view of power as they broaden the definition to "a wider view of power which encompasses the ability to act effectively, to influence people or divisions, and to achieve goals."⁵ Maintaining the distinction between power and authority grants literary historians, along with many other scholars, a valid avenue to explore the extent of women's

³ Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist. "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview." *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Edited by Michelle Rosaldo et al. Stanford University Press, 1974. p. 17

⁴Erler, Mary Carpenter., and Maryanne Kowalski. "Introduction." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowalski. University of Georgia Press, 1988. p. 1

⁵Ibid. p. 2

power, a subject which had previously been lacking due to women's general exclusion from public authority during the Middle Ages. Judith Bennett's study regarding the potential for women to exert public power in the English countryside specifies that while women were allowed to exercise specific forms of power, they were "under no circumstances allowed to become sanctioned authority."⁶

Despite Bennet's assertion, there has been some evidence that women were able to have relative influence under the patriarchal system by using their sexuality, however, this is one of the few "socially unacceptable avenues to power" despite being a valid way for women to undermine male authority.⁷ Martha Howell elaborates on how women could gain access to power through citizenship rights (i.e. marrying a powerful man or having a powerful father)⁸ but in these instances, it is only through her connection to a man that the woman is able to gain power and she does not actually have an authoritative claim to that power. While there are exceptions, women were often barred from formal education, could not inherit money or land if they had a surviving brother, could not hold public office, and were expected to devote themselves to domesticity and childbearing. Though noblewomen, such as Margaret Paston, did demonstrate a considerable ability to manage their household in their husband's absence, it is clear that even in the domestic sphere, women were ultimately subordinate to their husbands, lacking both biblical and legal authority over men. The patriarchal structure that limited women's access to authority is deeply rooted in the Christian belief that the relationship between

⁶ Bennett, Judith M. "Public Power and Authority in Medieval English Countryside." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowalski. University of Georgia Press, 1988. p. 28

⁷ Erler and Kowalski, "Introduction." 11

⁸ Howell, Martha C. "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political Status in Northern Medieval Cities." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowalski. University of Georgia Press, 1988. pp. 37-60

men and women should mirror that of Christ's authority over the Church; this metaphor results in the medieval tendency to elevate "mind over body," "reason over the passions," and "'masculine' over the 'feminine'".⁹ Women were limited in their social mobility and access to public and private authorities because of the perpetuation of this male-dominating perspective in medieval society,

Because the patriarchal structure is so embedded into medieval culture and it is impossible to separate women's agency from the inevitable influence and domination of the patriarchy, it becomes less important to lament the scarcity of evidence we have that women "overturned the patriarchal regime".¹⁰ Instead, we must search out moments where women demonstrate their ability to work within the system of patriarchy to claim some power, and perhaps autonomy, for themselves. Howell brings up the debate regarding "the relationship between structure and agency"; she points out that if we are to accept the common belief of 'agency' in terms of practical studies as being "both conscious and unconscious" (which, I believe the complexity of a human being operating within a dynamic larger social structure naturally lends itself to) then we must not only look at the power an individual is able to exert, but also at how they were enabled to utilize that power in a structure beholden to the widely accepted discourse theory which states that, "we can operate in society only in terms set by the discursive structures that organize it."¹¹ We must then acknowledge that female agency, and indeed gender hierarchies as a whole, are signals of instabilities in the discursive theory¹²; the

⁹ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 100, no. 2, 2017. p. 91.

¹⁰ Howell, Martha. "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe." *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, edited by Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin. Brill, 2019. p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 26, 28

¹² *Ibid.* p. 31

female characters being examined in this study were selected precisely because they seem to operate at these moments of shift or gap in the larger discursive system as their agency is overtly enabled by an authority which exists outside of the set worldly social structure. Examining their agency and potential for authority will show the ways in which medieval authors of female characters often circumvented their own social structure's expectations and even sidestep the dominating modern understanding of agency within defined structures.

Women and feminine culture have long been assigned to a marginalized societal identity which has led to an automatic tension with the dominant culture of the day or as Jane Chance states “[feminine] identification carries with it a dissonance, alienation within a patriarchal culture that insists on continuing primacy.”¹³ Particularly with the rise of the feudal system at the end of the early Middle Ages, which largely disempowered women because it “located authority within a network of obligations from which women were excluded,”¹⁴ women have been relegated to a subordinate status in medieval England, the primary area of focus for this study. Therefore, most studies do focus on how women operate within their subordination under the authority of men, though, it is these exceptions in which women are able to operate without the authority of man but where the persistent presence of outside influence looms that this study is determined to examine.

Magic + Religion

Evidenced by the overwhelming volume of texts which relegate female characters to love objects, trophies, or cautionary tales, female characters are typically bound by patriarchal social constructs that limit their ability to exert their own will over others. Some authors, however,

¹³ Chance, Jane. *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. p. 2

¹⁴ Bardsley, “Women’s Roles in the Middle Ages” p. 16

negotiate within these bounds to give the female characters access to power and authority by drawing on the influence of an outside force. In this project, I will focus on female characters who rely on divine intervention or their status as an ‘other’, in this case women who are identified as virgin martyrs or as one of the Fae, to solidify their power or authority. The use of magic and the Christian religion within texts is a common trope throughout much of medieval literature and the audience of these works would have a much more complex understanding of these concepts than perhaps a modern audience would.

In truth, magical and religious practices maintained an odd tension within the popular medieval consciousness; while in many ways they were distinct ideas, they also had a considerable degree of overlap that they may not have to a modern reader. Corinne Saunders argues that while the divine and the magical may have similar effects within the text, they manifest themselves very differently.¹⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski’s research into cultural reliance on religious and magical ideological frameworks seems to support Saunders’ suggestion that despite any differences in depictions, magic and religion ultimately offer individuals a similar lens with which to view the world. Malinowski defines magic as a “practical art consisting of acts which are only means to a definite end expected to follow later on” while religion is “a body of self-contained acts being themselves the fulfillment of their purpose”.¹⁶ He goes on to state:

Both magic and religion arise and function in situations of emotional stress: crises of life, lacunae in important pursuits, death and initiation into tribal mysteries, unhappy love and unsatisfied hate. Both magic and religion open up escapes from such situations and such

¹⁵ Saunders, Corinne J. *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*. D.S. Brewer, 2010. p. 37

¹⁶ Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays*. Doubleday, 1955. p. 88

impasses as offer no empirical way out except by ritual and belief into the domain of the supernatural.¹⁷

These conclusions highlight the ways in which magic and religion are perhaps not as distinct as a modern perspective would assume; however, Malinowski's assumption that magic merely operates as a means to an end, whereas religious acts fulfil their own purpose unnecessarily creates a division between the two practices and reduces each to a very limited understanding of religious or magical experience. For instance, under his definition of religion, religious acts such as prayer or almsgiving are performed for the sake of performing religious acts but in reality, people pray or give alms and expect tangible, non-spiritual benefits as a result. As will be demonstrated in this project, magic and religion function to simultaneously subvert societal expectations and undermine women's authority; however, it will also show that magic can have a self-fulfilment quality while divine intervention is sometimes merely a means to an end. Despite clear overlap in both the idea and practice of magic and religion, a key difference lies in the authority structure which bounds each; while magic, because it exists outside the organized social structure, can allow for self-authorization by the female characters, the religious women are still subject to a very real and dominating church hierarchy.

Medieval romances contain numerous different types of magic, from Nigromancy or black magic, to healing magic, to 'magik naturel.'¹⁸ Saunders specifies that "In the Middle Ages the marvellous was at least potentially part of everyday knowledge, belief and experience" and some magical practices were able to be accessed by those who exist within a typical society.¹⁹ Fairy mistresses on the other hand, obviously derive their power from fae magic which is deeply

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 87

¹⁸ Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Franklin's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales. The Norton Chaucer*, edited by David Lawton, W.W. Norton and Co., 2019, 1.1125

¹⁹ Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p. 2

rooted in the mythos of an ‘otherworld’ and is “neither demonic nor divine”²⁰ Fairies and the magic they use are quite complex and have been used in many contexts, but for the sake of this study, I will limit my scope to Richard Green’s definition of fairies: a “class of numinous, social, humanoid creatures who were widely believed to live at the fringes of the human lifeworld and interact intermittently with human beings.”²¹ More so than the magic that is believed to be accessible to the everyman, fairy magic bypasses the human world completely by finding its origins outside of established society. It is this ability to elude the conditions of society that allows the fae to maintain an authority that is not ultimately subordinated to the chivalric hierarchy. The otherness of this world is able to “promise what reality cannot”²² and this study will demonstrate the ways in which this ‘promise’ is manifested in the potential for female authority. Drawing on Diane Purkiss’ examination of fairies which states that fairies oversee “the borders of our lives, the seams between one phase of life and another,”²³ Green acknowledges the inherent tension between fairy influence and Christianity as they both claim authority over human lives.²⁴

My discussion of fairy mistresses is predicated on the assumption of audience belief, because to many in the medieval audience, fairies occupied a very real space. According to Green, treating the fairy elements of romances as “nothing more than a convenient narrative

²⁰ Ibid p. 179

²¹ Green, Richard Firth. *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. p. 4

²² Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p. 2

²³ Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*. p. 4.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 8: “Diane Purkiss has stressed the way fairies preside at and govern ‘the big crises of mortal life: birth, childhood and its transitions, adolescence, sexual awakening, pregnancy and childbirth, old age, death... the borders of our lives, the seams between one phase of life and another.’ Of course in the Middle Ages a very different kind of institution, the Christian church, claimed to have jurisdiction over these areas too.” See Diane Purkiss’ *At the Bottom of the Garden: A History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and other Troublesome Things*. (New York University Press. 2000.)

device” is a disservice to medieval audiences who “were themselves far from indifferent to truth claims about fairies.”²⁵ C.S. Lewis states that a satisfactory discussion of *ferlies*, his term for what we are calling fairies, and their influence on an audience can only be successful if it “has exhausted the possibilities of purely literary diagnoses,” and, more importantly for this study:

The second condition, therefore, is that the theory should deeply study the ferlies as things (in a sense) in the real world. Probably such things do not occur. But if no one in real life had either seen, or thought he saw, or accepted on hearsay, or dreaded, or hoped for, any such things, the poet and romancer could do nothing with them...it will illuminate the literary problem more if we can imagine what it would feel like to witness, or to think we had witnessed, or merely to believe in, the things. What it would feel like, and why.²⁶

Lewis’ commentary points to the fact that audiences of texts containing fairies would likely have some level of belief in fairies and in order to properly understand the impact that the power and authority of fairy mistresses would have I must recognize the medieval belief in the reality of fairies.

Genre + Texts

Another point on which my discussion depends is the fluid boundaries of genre distinctions; medieval audiences would not have the same perception of genre distinctions that modern authors and audiences impose on written texts. Despite the dual focus of this study on the seemingly distinct genres of romances and hagiography, the medieval tendency to view texts as less concretely bound by genre conventions and as a more fluid notion allows for meaningful

²⁵ Ibid. p.33

²⁶ Lewis, C.S. *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, collected by Walter Hooper, Cambridge University Press, 1966, p. 17

comparison of the female characters within each type of text. As many scholars before me have confirmed, pinning down a definition for romance is no small task and may not be possible at all. As W. R. J. Barron notes, “critics increasingly prefer to define the medieval romance in terms of mode rather than genre,”²⁷ and consents that romances tend to express themselves through the same “conventional motifs”.²⁸ Meanwhile, Michelle Sweeney’s attempt to place bounds on the romance genre acknowledges the difficulty of the task and, instead of pinpointing particular plot points, highlights the thematic elements that are common throughout much of the romance genre.²⁹ Perhaps the most visually striking metaphor for understanding the romance genre is Helen Cooper’s suggestion that the romance genre is more like a family or lineage of texts instead of a “series of incarnations or clones of a single Platonic Idea.”³⁰ Approaching romances by looking at their thematic elements rather than solely on plot allows for more overlap with traditionally religious texts and more closely aligns with the medieval audience’s approach to texts.

Chretien de Troyes is regarded as the “inventor of the Arthurian romance genre” which became popular in the High and Late Middle Ages.³¹ Chretien identified the three main

²⁷ Barron, W. R. J. *English Medieval Romance*. Longman, 1987. p. 2

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 4-5: “Whatever genre the romance mode may adopt, they find expression through the same conventional motifs: the mysterious challenge or summons to a mission; the lonely journey through hostile territory; the first sight of the beloved; the single combat against overwhelming odds or a monstrous opponent.”

²⁹ Sweeney, Michelle. *Magic in medieval romance from Chretien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer*. Four Courts Press, 2000, p. 11.: “Some of the most popular issues to be found consistently under debate in the romances are ideas of love, the nature of free will, how communities are structured, and the claims of loyalty, and one of the most popular motifs consistently to appear in the romances is magic.”

³⁰ Cooper, Helen. *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 8-9: Romances, therefore, will have resemblances or traits in common with one another but variation from a standard does not exclude a text from the romance genre, it merely expands upon what the romance genre is capable of, even in cases of extreme variation: “Even the characteristic most widely considered definitive for the genre, the happy ending, can be absent without destroying the sense that one is dealing with a romance.”

³¹ Newman, Barbara. *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular Against the Sacred*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. p. 26

components of romances as “matiere (plot), sen (meaning or theme), and conjointure (artful construction).”³² In her book *Medieval Crossover*, Barbara Newman examines these elements of romances in order to determine the relationship between the secular and sacred; Newman’s discussion concludes that the secular conjointure (romances) can be a touchstone for a Christian sen and a pagan matiere.³³ According to Newman’s argument, romances can be closely related to cultural religiosity and serve a similar purpose, even while the methods they employ (i.e. a pagan plot) are distinct. Barron even goes so far as to say the medieval lay readers of romances would not have made any “absolute distinction between the oblique social and moral commentary of the romances and the overt didacticism of the highly entertaining, action-packed saints’ lives.”³⁴ Supposing this is true, a comparison of female characters in these texts might be not only valid but necessary to understand how medieval audiences would have perceived women’s depictions of power and authority.

Romances and saints’ lives appeal to similar audiences and serve relatively similar purposes. Romances are, by nature, written in the vernacular, in this case Middle English or French. Romances originally appealed to the elite members of the Court because the subject matter was generally reflective of their ideals and they also drew the attention of many patrons, both male and female.³⁵ Romances started circulating within the court and were often passed on to children and foreign courts; as they spread, they were adapted to “fresh surroundings” and “new linguistic or political terrains.”³⁶ Therefore, while they originally appealed to the noble class in France, toward the middle of the thirteenth century in England romances became more

³² Ibid. 26

³³ Ibid. 25

³⁴ Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, pp. 57- 58

³⁵ Krueger, Roberta L. “Introduction.” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*. Edited by Roberta Krueger, Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 3

³⁶ Ibid. 4

and more popular with lay and bourgeoisie readers and were adapted accordingly.³⁷ Similarly, vernacular saints' lives would circulate among lay persons, and their stories would be recognizable to similar audiences because they provided access to religious tales that lay persons may not have access to via Latin scripture. Furthering the idea that saints' lives and romances occupy similar space in medieval literary culture, there are numerous manuscripts which contain a compilation of religious and secular texts, perhaps the most well known being the Auchinleck Manuscript. These manuscripts serve as evidence that medieval audiences and compilers of manuscripts would not have seen a need to delineate between collections of religious or secular texts. Andrea Hopkins further emphasizes that virgin martyr saints' lives are found in the same manuscripts as romances at a "striking" rate.³⁸ When one considers Carol Fewster's statement that medieval audiences' understanding of a text is highly dependent on a "sense of intertextuality", or based on "prior reading of comparable texts", alongside this manuscript evidence, it becomes clear that a reader's understanding of female power and authority would necessarily have to take into account both religious and secular texts.³⁹ While the primary purpose of saints' lives has always been to provide Christians with "examples of virtuous conduct" and romances are primarily to entertain, there is considerable crossover as saints' lives became increasingly indistinguishable from romances in their depiction of Christian heroes and heroines and employment of a compelling, dramatic plot while romances offered blatantly moral overtones throughout their tales.⁴⁰ The overt similarities in intent behind these two types of text

³⁷ Ibid. 4

³⁸ Hopkins, Andrea. "Female Saints and Romance Heroines: Feminine Fiction and Faith among the Literate Elite." *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, edited by Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman and Michelle Sweeney, D.S. Brewer, 2010, p.124

³⁹ Fewster, Carol. *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance*. D.S. Brewer, 1987, p.3

⁴⁰ Smith, Elizabeth Leigh. *Middle English Hagiography and Romance in Fifteenth-Century England: From Competition to Critique*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, p. 14

lead to the conclusion that both the hagiographic and romance texts offer the contemporary reader a window into the possibilities of female agency.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which romances and virgin martyr saints' lives depict women's access to power and authority, I will focus on three examples of fairy mistresses in romances alongside three of the most popular virgin martyr saints' lives and extrapolate my conclusions from these specific instances. This project will use the unnamed fairy mistress in Marie de France's twelfth century lai *Lanval*⁴¹, Dame Tryamour from Thomas Chestre's fourteenth century Middle English romance, *Sir Launfal*⁴², and the unnamed fairy mistress from late fourteenth century *Tomas off Ersseldoune*⁴³. According to Roberta Krueger, the femino-centric romance can be traced to Marie de France's lais of the late twelfth century.⁴⁴ *Lanval* is one of the earliest romances featuring the trope of the fairy mistress and it influences many of the romances that came after it, both through direct inspiration as is the case of *Sir Launfal*, or simply by setting the expectation for how a fae woman engages with the male protagonist of the texts. By retaining much of the plot and organization of *Lanval*, the differences in *Sir Launfal* are starkly apparent and enable us to see how the women, and fae magic by extension, are allowed access to power and authority nearly two centuries later after the concept of fairy mistresses was popularized. The fairy mistress in *Tomas off Ersseldoune* departs significantly from the norms

⁴¹ All references to *Lanval* are from Marie de France, "Lanval," translated by Judith P. Shoaf. 2005 <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/jshoaf/Marie/lanval.pdf>

⁴² All references to *Sir Launfal* are from Chestre, Thomas. "Sir Launfal." *The Middle English Breton Lays*. edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995. Translations of *Sir Launfal* are from Chester, Thomas. "Sir Launfal." *Middle English Series*, translated by James Weldon, In Parentheses Publications, Cambridge, Ontario, 2000.

⁴³ All references to *Tomas off Ersseldoune* come from "Tomas off Ersseldoune." *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune: Printed from Five Manuscripts*, edited by James A. H. Murray, London, 1875.

⁴⁴ Krueger, Roberta L. "Questions of gender in Old French courtly romance." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*. Edited by Roberta Krueger, Cambridge University Press, 2000. p.138

we see in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*, both in terms of when and how the woman demonstrates any power and by allowing the reader to see the influence of the ‘otherworld’ that many romances allude to but few directly show.

While there are numerous virgin martyr saints’ lives that would be appropriate for this study, I have limited it to focus solely on the thirteenth-century Katherine Group saints’ lives: *Seinte Katherine*, *Seinte Margarete*, and *Seinte Juliene*.⁴⁵ The Katherine Group was widely circulated in the Middle Ages and their legends are representative of the wider tradition of texts which attempt to offer women a general guide for morality and faith; it is this popularity and universality that makes them valuable for this study. The Katherine Group saints’ lives have been the subject of countless studies but they are particularly valuable because, according to Karen Winstead, while they “do not depart substantially from their Latin sources” the authors “freely embellished, paraphrased and condensed their materials” in a way that better reflected the cultural milieu of the High Middle Ages.⁴⁶ The Katherine Group has also been used by many previous scholars as a way to draw a comparison between the virgin martyrs and romance heroines and between the basic plot structure of each genre. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne underscores this connection when she states “virgin martyr saints’ lives use a romance script”; the Katherine Group in particular stands apart because “No other legendary in twelfth- or thirteenth-century England so intensively presents the female saint as virgin martyr and romance heroine.”⁴⁷ It is evident that the Katherine Group is a prime candidate for comparison with secular romances,

⁴⁵ This project uses the texts as they appear in MS Bodley 34. All references and translations will come from *The Katherine Group MS Bodley 34: Religious Writings for Women in Medieval England*. Edited by Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Ann Robertson. Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2016.

⁴⁶ Winstead, Karen. *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*. Cornell University Press, 1997, pp. 23, 39.

⁴⁷ Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn. *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture 1150-1300*. Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 106, 6

only this project will find its crossover between the virgin martyrs and the fairy mistresses rather than the typical comparison with the romance heroine. However, it must be acknowledged first that this project focuses primarily on the power and authority found *within* these texts. Jane Schulenburg affirms the significance of saints in medieval culture because “the perception of sanctity was a function of the community; one was after all only a saint *for* and *by* others.”⁴⁸ While the power that these female saints hold in the community and medieval society is certainly valuable to acknowledge, this study will focus on the ways in which these women demonstrate their power within the texts and the ways in which their access to power and authority is hindered or enabled by divine intervention.

Because of the scope of this project, my primary sources are necessarily limited. There are many methods and angles by which to assess the power and authority of female characters but I have narrowed my focus to only include the depiction of the fairy mistresses of romance texts and the virgin martyrs of hagiographic texts. While I could have included a comparison to the romance heroines typically examined for their agency, or any number of well-known female characters in the Middle English corpus, such as Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, I have limited my study to these two female tropes in order to enable a deeper study into a narrower field. Perhaps a continuation of this study could expand to include more types of female characters which present their own complex relationship to power and authority. These types of female characters could be examined through the role of mothers depicted by the Virgin Mary, queens seen through Guinevere, or even daughters, epitomized by Pearl.

⁴⁸ Schulenburg, Jane Tibbetts. “Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100.” *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski, The University of Georgia Press, 1988, p. 103, their emphases.

Chapter 1: Locating Power and Authority in the Female Body

To be a woman in medieval literature is to be, at least in part, defined in terms of your body. One of the most common ways this is accomplished is through an overt focus on a woman's beauty or lack thereof and directly correlating that to her worth, often through the eyes of a male suitor. The focus on women's bodies does not stop with their appearance; female characters are also characterized by how they *use* their body. As a consequence of female characters being defined by their appearance and how they employ their body, their identities become inseparably intertwined with their bodies. This chapter will explore how virgin martyr saints and fairy mistresses are physically depicted in each text and the ways in which their power is derived from their virginity or their sexuality. These aspects of their character can be used to demonstrate the power they possess both over themselves and over men. This chapter will delve into how female agency can be assessed through a series of opposite (or perhaps complementary) concepts: beauty and grotesqueness, sexuality and virginity, and strength and vulnerability.

The Power of Beauty

While texts which feature virgin martyr saints and fairy mistresses all generally focus on the beauty of the central female character, there seem to be different motivations behind highlighting female beauty depending on the genre. Both genres have their own generic pattern within the texts: virgin martyr saints' lives introduce a young, beautiful maiden who is threatened by a male character who wants to marry or otherwise ruin, possess, or discredit her (typically a suitor, sometimes aided by the father).⁴⁹ The maiden then undergoes a series of trials

⁴⁹ Karen Winstead emphasizes how much of a standard this trope is for virgin martyr hagiography when she states: "The virgin martyrs legend offers a heroine who is invariably young, beautiful, and endangered by sexual predators." Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 12

or torments at the hands of her male adversaries which she overcomes with the help of God until she is ultimately martyred for the sake of preserving her virginity. Meanwhile, the fairy mistresses typically appear to a male hero who is failed in some way by society and she offers the hero everything not being offered by society. Oftentimes, the fairy mistress' love, gifts or support are contingent upon a series of conditions; the heroes' relationship with the mistress is sometimes tested and regained, sometimes lost forever, and sometimes leaves the hero alone, but with knowledge or abilities gained through the mistress' interaction with him. In each case, the beauty of the female character is extensively described either in terms of an irresistibly pure and desirable yet unattainable object or as a rewarding but ultimately attainable object. Though the motivation behind the stories' description of the women's beauty greatly influences how they are depicted, Carol Fester does point out that there are some "conventional details"⁵⁰ that are recurring in the description of women's beauty: references to fair skin, a white swan's neck, and bright eyes, among other traits. This conventionality demonstrates the fact that readers of these texts would expect the story to dwell, at least to some degree, on the women's physical aspects and they would be likely to derive significance from the types of descriptors used.

The descriptions of beauty in the hagiographic texts emphasize the saints' purity, unattainability, and relationship with Christ. Saint Katherine is introduced as "feier ant freolich o wlite ant o westum," [fair and lovely in face and form] immediately attempting to conjure an image in the audience's mind of the typical beautiful heroine by emphasizing a fair complexion and alluring body, common traits that audiences would expect of a valuable female character. The narrator even remarks on the fact that she can be identified as a noble by her physical form implying health, beauty, and a well cared for body: "ah thi schene nebscheft ant ti semliche

⁵⁰ Fester, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance*, p. 9

schape schaweth wel thet tu art freomonne foster” [but your fair face and your seemly shape show well that you are a child of noble men]. The emperor Maxence, while openly condemning Katherine’s religious beliefs, draws attention to her ‘fair face’ and ‘seemly shape’ as her primary identifying factors, even before her exceptional knowledge and wisdom. It is important to note that here Katherine’s body is not just something by which she can be identified, but it establishes her as a noble queen, creating a concrete link between her body and her power as perceived by others. Katherine’s status as a member of nobility, and indeed a ruling queen, will be important throughout this study because it differentiates her from both Juliana and Margaret in terms of earthly status and power. Juliana and Margaret, though both the daughters of a ruling noble heathen, are never entrusted with any worldly power because of this. Katherine’s beauty, while a contributing factor to her being perceived as a threat to Maxence, is compounded by her knowledge, rhetorical skill, and Christian belief (all of which will be further explored in the next chapter.) Because Katherine has significant ruling power, she can be perceived as more of a threat to the male power in the story. Therefore, while the male figure in this story does not seek to directly violate her body, he does seem to focus extensively on her beauty and femininity as he attempts to undermine her belief system. This focus on her beauty by Maxence seen above detracts and distracts from the fact that she does have worldly power as a queen while simultaneously demonstrating for the audience the fact that female beauty is always a focal point for men because the female body as a marginalized ‘other’ in the patriarchal structure will always be a threat worth objectifying and dominating.

While Katherine’s body is a symbol of her nobility and used in conjunction with her intellect to threaten Maxence, Saint Juliana and Saint Margaret are targeted in their stories

because of their unattainable beauty alone. Juliana's beauty is depicted with the might of a weapon against Eleusius:

As he hefde enchere bihalden swithe yeorne hire utnume feire ant freoliche yuhethe, felde him iwundet inwith in his heorte with the flan the of luv fleoth, swa thet him thuhte thet ne mahte he nanes weis withute the lechnunge of hire luv libben.

[When he had at one time beheld very earnestly her exceedingly fair and beautiful youth, he felt himself wounded inside in his heart with the arrows which fly from love, so that it seemed to him that he could not in any way live without the medicine of her love.]

As in Katherine's story, the use of 'feire' and 'freoliche' conjure an image of the beauty standard that a medieval audience would expect, except in this case, these qualities are given an immediate effect on a male character. Juliana's beauty causes Eleusius to be 'wounded' by love, ultimately setting off the chain of events that led to her martyrdom. It is important, however, to note the dynamic created by attributing power to Juliana's beauty; the power of her beauty to captivate Eleusius foreshadows the power she will demonstrate throughout the story as she continuously thwarts his advances. Though Juliana is clearly objectified by Eleusius and turned simply into a body that he can possess, this interaction also shows how integral the female body is to the male perception of female influence, as she is only influential here because of her appearance and the fact that he perceives her as something to be acquired for his own sake. While Margaret's beauty lacks the more aggressive description that is present in Juliana's story, Margaret does stand out in the eyes of a male suitor in very much the same way as Juliana. Olibrius orders his men to capture Margaret stating: "ant wel schal hire iwurthen for hire lufsume leor with al thet Ich welde" [and it shall go well for her because of her lovely countenance, with all that I rule over]. Her entire worth is placed on her beautiful countenance in a way that

demonstrates the same influence that Juliana possesses. From the perspective of the male figures in these stories, these women occupy a strange position where they simultaneously have no power because they are merely objects and yet their beauty imbues them with the ability to influence the male figures, albeit unwantedly on their part.

From having their beauty be a signal of their nobility to it giving them unwanted influence over men, these saints' lives in part revolve around their physical appearance; as such, it is important to note the way in which their physical form indicates their relationship with God. A recurring image throughout all three saints' lives is the description of the female saints' bright, shining, radiant faces. While this does allude to their beauty, it also indicates their resemblance with Christ and foreshadows their roles as intercessors for Christ on behalf of humankind. Katherine's "schene nebschaft ant schape" [bright face and shape] which, according to Maxence, should be "prudeliche ischrud ant iprud ba with pel ant with purple" [proudly clothed and adorned with rich and purple clothing], depicts the closest resemblance to Christ as her brilliance is explicitly expressed in terms of royalty, with the references to the color purple. The use of royal imagery here emphasizes the royal aspect of Christ as He is the Prince of Heaven and the parallel with the virgin martyr indicates the divine source of worldly power held by the saint. Though Margaret and Juliana's stories lack the overt royal imagery, they also have the same description of brilliance that mirrors traditional images of Christ. As Juliana opposes Eleusius, she is described as "schiminde hire nebscheaft schene as the sunne" [her face bright, blazing like the sun]. Her beauty is, therefore, almost blinding in its radiance and gives her the appearance of a divine being. Margaret appears in the same sun-like radiance, but the demon who is in awe of her form also draws the direct connection between Christ's power, the maiden's power, and her beauty that is only tangentially implied in the other two texts:

Me thuncheth thet tu schinest schenre then the sunne, ah over alle thine limen the
 leitith of leome, the fingres se freoliche (me thuncheth), ant se freoliche feire, ant
 se briht blikinde, thet tu the with blescedest ant makedest te merke of the mihti
 Rode the reavede me mi brother, ant me with bale bondes bitterliche bindest, thet
 Ich lokin ne mei, swa thet liht leometh ant leiteth, me thuncheth.

[It seems to me that you shine brighter than the sun, but over all your limbs that the light
 blazes upon, the fingers are so fine, it seems, and so beautifully fair, and shining so
 bright, with which you crossed yourself and which made the mark of the mighty Cross
 which tore my brother from me, and you have bound me bitterly with cruel bonds, that I
 may not look, since the light gleams so and shines, I think]

There are three important elements of the demon's statement: first, the demon comments upon Margaret's beauty and how she seems to blaze like a radiant sun and because of that light, he is repelled; second, he draws attention to her beautiful fingers and arms as they make the sign of the cross so that the religious act is rooted in her physical beauty; and third, he emphasizes the active role her beauty takes when it so resembles Christ because she is able to 'bind him fast with cruel bonds.' The pure beauty of all three maidens ties them to the image of Christ that would exist in the mind of their audience as medieval images often portray Christ in a radiance of light. The maiden's mere physical description alone forges a connection in the mind of the medieval readers between divine power and female agency in hagiographic texts and contributes to the readers' ability to suspend their disbelief and expect a significant amount of female power throughout the rest of the text.

Female beauty is treated very differently in romance texts and beauty has a very different effect on the male characters; however, as in the hagiographic texts, the female characters'

beauty is undeniably a great source of their outward expression of power. The beauty of the fairy mistresses establishes a delicate balance between manifesting the standard beauty ideal expected in a romance heroine and emphasizing the otherness of the fairy mistresses through the overt reliance on the women's sexuality. The description of Lanval's mistress is filtered through multiple perspectives as it is written by a female author, Marie de France, but the mistress is also being viewed through Lanval's eyes, perhaps explaining why there is such an emphasis on the physical beauty of the mistress. Lanval's mistress is described as follows:

Her body was slim, long-waisted, tall,
 Her neck was whiter than fresh snow-fall.
 Grey were her eyes, white her face,
 Lovely her mouth, nose in the right place,
 Brown eyebrows, forehead smooth and fair,
 Bright blond, crisply curling hair.⁵¹

This blazon highlights each major physical aspect of the mistress and in each case defaults to the audience's expectation of beauty, reinforcing the fact that the male figure in the story is justified in being captivated by her appearance. Thomas Chestre uses a similar blazon as he introduces Dame Tryamour, however, he uses metaphorical imagery common in other English romances to emphasize her portrayal as a romance heroine and draw attention to her femininity:

Sche was as whyt as lylle yn May,
 Or snow that sneweth yn wynterys day -...
 The rede rose, whan sche ys newe,...
 Her here schon as gold wyre;⁵²

⁵¹ *Lanval*, ll. 564-569

⁵² *Sir Launfal* ll.292-298

[She was as white as a lily in May, or snow that falls in the winter...The red rose, new blossomed...her hair shone like threads of gold]

The images of the woman as a white lily, or snow on a winter's day, or a red rose, or golden wiry hair were so deeply embedded in a medieval audience's cultural consciousness as it appears throughout a large portion of romance texts. The fairy mistress is, therefore, assuming the role of the romance heroine through appearance and the audience would then expect her to play a certain role in the narrative. It is this beauty and status that first engages the attention of the male knight and leads to the mistresses' easy influence over the male figure. The expectation of the mistress as a romance heroine whose beauty is her sole appeal will be important to remember when we discuss the agency of the mistress as the story progresses. Typically, the sole focus in the initial descriptions of romance heroines "enact a characterization of femininity as static beauty" as opposed to the male hero's "masculinity as valiant activity"⁵³. A medieval audience, therefore, would be used to beauty being an indicator of a simple, stagnant character, not likely to play any significant role in the story other than as a desirable object for the male protagonist to pursue. This study will demonstrate the ways in which the fairy mistresses defy this expectation because of their identities as Fae.

Though Marie de France and Thomas Chestre take similar approaches to describing the beauty of their fairy mistresses, *Thomas off Erseldoune* employs the common romance trope known as the loathly lady motif which relies upon the female character shifting between extreme beauty and utter hideousness, often as a result of male action. Thomas' mistress receives the least amount of physical description, however, the author still ensures the audience can identify the mistress as a beautiful romance heroine as he states:

⁵³ Breuer, Heidi. *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*. Routledge, 2009, p. 17

Als dose þe sonne on someres daye,

Þat faire lady hir selfe scho schone.

Hir selle it was of roelle bone,

ffull semely was þat syghte to see!⁵⁴

[As does the sun on a summer's day, that fair lady herself shone. Her saddle was of ivory bone, that was a very splendid sight to see!]

Despite the lack of a more descriptive account, Thomas' mistress is still a beautiful, fair maiden that draws the attention of all whom she encounters. Her presence is boiled down to merely being a remarkable 'sight' for Thomas to observe. Her beauty, however, is only a fleeting aspect because as soon as Thomas possessed her body, the mistress' beauty fades so that her once beautiful form transforms into something repulsive; her once beautiful hair now "hange all ouer hir hede" [hung all over her head], her eyes now "semede owte," [seemed deranged], and most importantly, Thomas remarks, "How arte þou fadyde þus in þe face, / Þat schane by-fore als þe sonne so bryght[e]!"⁵⁵ [How you are faded thus in your face that before shone so bright like the sun!]. Like the female saints, Thomas' mistress is depicted with a distinct radiance that illuminates her form and alludes to her otherness; in the case of the saints, it alludes to their relationship with Christ, but in this case, the mistress' radiance may suggest her otherworldliness. The fact that she loses her luster after she allows Thomas to have her body suggests that the power and influence that she had to entice Thomas was based singly on her beauty. Thus, when he satiates his desire, she seems to lose the beauty derived from his male gaze. Though this study will discuss how fairy mistresses can use their bodies as an avenue to

⁵⁴ *Tomas off Ersseldoune* ll. 47-50

⁵⁵ *Tomas off Ersseldoune* ll. 54, 132, 139-140.

power, Thomas' mistress provides insight into how a fairy mistress may maintain power even when she does not have the ideal beautiful body with which to manipulate the man.

Contrasted Identities: Virginitly and Sexuality

While the female characters' physical appearances alone are shown to have considerable power to influence, tempt, and entice men in hagiographic and romance texts, the female characters are more remarkable for how they ground their identity in the use of their bodies. The female characters chosen for this study illustrate the implications of women choosing to establish their identity in either their commitment to virginitly or their willingness to utilize their sexuality for power. Despite being quite different paths to power, both virginitly and sexuality operate as two sides of the same coin—they both revolve around women's choices regarding how to use their own body and they can both subvert the society's typical expectations of women's agency.

As we delve into these contrasting identities, it is important to remember where the power originates. The virgin martyr saints have wholly dedicated themselves to a life of physical and spiritual purity and virginitly in the name of devotion to Christ. By doing so, they have effectively subverted the typical fantasy of women as sexual objects.⁵⁶ Because there are so many links between the saints' legends and historical figures, the saints depicted had to be exempted from typical expectations of marriage and childbearing by redirecting their desire from worldly love to divine devotion. The virgin martyrs' adherence to their vow of virginitly draws on what Karen Winstead states is the conflict between "material and spiritual values" which were of "abiding interest to medieval audience," because while the audience may hold a particular set of expectations for women during the Middle Ages, their expectations would differ for a woman

⁵⁶ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p.5

who devotes herself to religion.⁵⁷ Therefore, the link between virginity and God's authority would be fairly apparent to a medieval audience because women who assume a position in a divine order are often expected to sacrifice everything, including an adherence to society's demands, in exchange for a deeper connection with God. Sarah Salih suggests that the Katherine Group martyrs are "accorded an authority which stems from their privileged knowledge of the divine."⁵⁸ While I agree that they are "represented as active agents,"⁵⁹ we must acknowledge that they are agents acting on behalf of a higher being and their power cannot be attributed to their own authority. According to Winstead, these legends can be read in ways which challenge the "traditional relationships of dominion and subordination,"⁶⁰ effectively allowing us to read them for a greater insight into how women's virginity allowed them to substitute a husband's authority for God's authority.

While the saints' virginity provides them with an avenue to power under God's authority which a medieval audience would acknowledge as abnormal though still within the discursive structure which bound the Christian culture of medieval England, the fairies exist outside of this structure completely. Fairies were typically viewed as "shifting and dangerous" because while they can have positive impacts on human life, they represent a great uneasiness regarding the 'other'.⁶¹ Roberta Krueger argues that the uneasiness and fear surrounding fairies in literature stem from the fact that these women "enjoy autonomy denied to historic women in courts and households."⁶² Meanwhile, Helen Cooper adds that these fairy women have an advantage because they exist outside of the discursive structure which is based on Christian morality and

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 5

⁵⁸ Salih, Sarah, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, D.S. Brewer, 2001, p.54.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.49

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 65-66

⁶¹ Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p. 192

⁶² Krueger, "Questions of gender in Old French courtly romance." p. 143

can therefore “offer dangerous patronage,” “represent the unpredictable or inexplicable,” or “offer sexual favours to the hero without incurring religious condemnation.”⁶³ The fairies’ uniqueness as a threat to the patriarchal, Christian society lies not simply in their status as an ‘other’ but also in the consequences of this status as they wield their sexuality without repercussions, and are therefore wielding their power without repercussions because they are not subject to any recognized authority. So, though the virgin martyrs are still operating within the set discursive structure, they are able to bypass the world’s marriage-centric patriarchal hierarchy by committing to virginity; the fairies’ embrace of their sexuality as it exists only in limited overlap with the human world is an immense source of power unreachable by medieval women, but only demonstrable by a literary character.

Though this study will dwell on some of the audience's perceived limitations on women’s agency despite the power and authority wielded by these extraordinary female characters, each female character must be given credit for taking on an active role in defining her existence outside of the norm. Each virgin martyr made the conscious choice to surrender themselves to God’s authority; their stories are predicated on the knowledge that they are willing and enthusiastic participants in carrying out God’s will. Each tale indicates the saints’ active choice to pursue a life of virginity and divine service, even though it ultimately leads to their death. Saint Katherine is depicted making the choice to keep herself in maidenhood and engaged in an active, two-sided arrangement with Christ: “Thus hwil ha wiste hire — ant thohte áá to witen hire — meiden i Meithhad...He haveth iweddeth Him to mi meithhad with the ring of rihte bileave, ant ich habbe to Him treowliche itake me” [Thus while she kept herself — and thought always to keep herself — a maiden in maidenhood... He has wedded Himself to my maidenhood

⁶³ Cooper, Helen. “Introduction” *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, Edited by Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman and Michelle Sweeney, D.S. Brewer, 2010, p. xvi

with the ring of right belief, and I have committed myself to Him truly]. Katherine views her choice to preserve her maidenhood as the choice which enables her intimacy with Christ because Christ weds himself, not to her, but to her maidenhood; furthermore, she states that she has committed herself to him, taking on an involved role in deciding her own status. In the lives of Saint Juliana and Saint Margaret, the author emphasizes the woman's decision to subordinate herself to God by showing lengthy prayers in which she commits herself to God and vows virginity. Juliana's decision to devote herself to living under God's authority can be seen in her ardent prayer as she states:

ah ha truste upon Him thet ne truked na mon thet trewliche Him truste, on ant eode to chirche euche dahethes dei to leornin Godes lare, biddinde yeorne with reowfule reames thet He wissede hire o hwuche wise ha mahte witen hire meithhath from mones man unwemmet.

[but she trusted in Him who does not fail anyone who truly trusts in Him, and went to church at dawn every day to learn God's lore, praying earnestly with pitiful cries that He guide her as to what way she might keep her maidenhood unblemished from sex with a man.]

Despite being betrothed against her will (an obvious and imminent threat to her maidenhood), her first and only instinct is to plead with God for His help preserving her maidenhood. She acknowledges the omnipotence of God to enact His will and implies that she deserves His help because she truly believes and trusts in Him. This prayer indicates that she chose to both rely on God and use her maidenhood as a sign of her faithfulness or fealty to Him, furthering the idea that the virgin martyrs are so intimately involved in Christ and are able to operate as his agents because of their choice to remain virgins. Meanwhile, Margaret is even more explicit in her

surrendering to God as she gives up her bodily autonomy for Christ's sake and dedicates her physical body to Christ:

Hald, hehe Lauerd, min heorte, Ich biseche The, in treowe bileve, ant biwite Thu mi bodi — thet is al bitaht to The — from flesliche fulthen, thet neaver mi sawle ne isuled beo in sunne thurh thet licomes lust thet lutle hwile liketh. Lauerd, lustu to me. Ich habbe a deore gimstan, ant Ich hit habbe iyeve The — mi meithhad I mene, blostme brihstest i bodi the hit bereth ant biwit wel. Ne let Tu neaver the unwiht warpen hit i wurthinc, for hit is the leof, hit is him thinge lothest, ant weorreth ant warpeth ever thertoward with alles cunnes wrenches. Lauerd, Thu were me ant wite hit ever to The.

[Hold, lofty Lord, my heart, I beseech You, in true belief, and protect my body — which is completely given over to You — from fleshly filth, so that my soul may never be sullied in sin through that fleshly desire that pleases for a little while. Lord, listen to me. I have a precious gemstone, and I have given it to you — my virginity I mean, the brightest blossom in the body that holds and protects it well. May you never let the Fiend cast it into the mire, for (just as) it is dear to you, it is the most loathsome thing to him, and he makes war and always attacks it with all kinds of wiles. Lord, defend me and hold it ever for Yourself]

Even more so than Juliana and Katherine, Margaret explicitly uses transactional language that indicates she is trading her body (meaning her virginity) for physical protection against worldly and fiendish threats. Margaret gives up her virginity, her 'deore gimstan' and 'blostme brihstest', the most valuable thing she has, because she knows that it is what the Lord values and what the world and the devil loathe. It is the act of relinquishing control over her body and entrusting God with the role of protector that signifies such a clear willingness on the part of the Margaret, as

with the other virgin martyrs, to prioritize their virginity and devotion to God's authority above trying to claim authority or autonomy themselves.

Despite offering up ultimate control of their lives to a higher authority, the saints repeatedly acknowledge the fact that they receive ample reward from God for this sacrifice. The saints do not view their willing subordination to God as any restraint on their power; quite the opposite, they are further empowered by God's authority and they credit their virginity for this advantage. Saint Katherine speaks of His gifts to her in terms of salvation and everlasting life as she states she does not fear death: "wel is me that ich mot ba mi flesch ant mi blod offrin Him to lake the offrede to His Feader, for me ant for al volc, Himself o the Rode" [well it is for me that I may offer both my flesh and my blood as a sacrifice to Him who offered to His Father, for me and for all folk, Himself on the Rood.] Christ's actions on the cross, therefore, appear to more than compensate for Katherine's offering of her body and her agency to God as she argues that Christ's actions necessitate her giving up her entire self, her flesh and blood, to accomplish His will. While Katherine dwells on the grand scale of salvation, Saint Juliana and Saint Margaret emphasize the physical power granted to them in this life, not just the promise of rewards in the next life; their tales reference the "mihte of meithhad" [might of maidenhood] and the "meidenes menske" [strength of maidens] respectively in order to concretely connect the saints' abilities throughout their stories to their virginity and by extension their relationship with God. Juliana's interaction with Belial of Hell epitomizes the notion that the virgin martyrs attain worldly power through their connection with God via their virginity as he laments that virgins are "iwepnet to weorin ayein us!" [armed to wage war against us!] and as he cries,

O Jhesu, Godes Sune, The havest Thin hehe seotel o meithhades mihte — hire to muche menske — wa wurchest Tu us therwith! To wel Thu witest ham the treowliche habbeth hire in heorte ihalden, yef ha milde ant meoke beon as meiden deh to beonne.

[Oh Jesus, God’s Son, you who have your high seat in maidenhood’s might — a great honor to her — you work us woe through that! You protect them too well who truly have her held in the heart, if they be mild and meek as a maiden should be.]

Spoken by Juliana’s enemy during combat, these words reveal that even those who oppose God and his agents acknowledge the extraordinary power that can be gained through serving God, specifically through maidenhood. The demon depicts the saint as a warrior for God, waging war on the infernal world through her commitment to virginity and receiving protection because she embodies all of the basic requirements for maidenhood: having God in her heart, and remaining mild and meek. Through her submission, she ultimately receives more power than would be possible if she were to abandon her vow of virginity. Reiterating the idea that the saints gain power greater than would be otherwise possible through their commitment to God, Margaret’s story again uses transactional language as she states: “Mi Lauerd haveth mine limen sunderliche iseilet, ant haveth, to mi gimstan thet Ich yettede Him, iyarket ant iyeve me kempene crune.”

[My Lord has specially sealed my limbs and has, for my gemstone that I granted to him, prepared and given me the champion’s crown.] Margaret alludes to both the greater spiritual implications of her connection to the divine through her reference to the ‘kempene crune’; however, more importantly, she references the fact that because of her willingness to grant Him her ‘gimstan’, or virginity, God will protect her physical body, or her ‘limen’. This statement points to the physical benefits of a commitment to God and highlights the fact that while God may require submission through virginity which leads to terrible worldly consequences for the

saints, He is also willing to grant them powers above normal humans to resist, repel, and endure physical torments. A medieval audience would be able to recognize that the virgin martyrs are so extraordinary and powerful throughout their stories because of their connection to the divine, but the legends seem to go to extremes to explicitly attribute their power to a higher authority. As we will see throughout this exploration, the hagiographies allow the saints to demonstrate awesome power while making it quite clear to their medieval audience that this is only possible for the female characters because they have exempted themselves from normal expectations and limitations with a connection to the divine.

Fairy mistresses do not have to subjugate themselves to a higher authority in order to preserve their ability to wield power or be sexually promiscuous; from their first appearances, the fairy mistresses willfully engage in sexual activity with the male knights, demonstrating their complete autonomy over their bodies. In both *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*, the entire plot is predicated on the fairy mistress being an idealized, willing, and eager lover to a male knight who, in some way, is lacking fulfillment in normal society. Lanval's lover "gives him her love, and what's more, her body."⁶⁴ While a transactional parallel to the virgin martyr's sacrifice of autonomy in exchange for protection, the fairy mistress maintains her authority within the relationship because the author explicitly acknowledges the mistress' ability to maintain authority over Lanval: "Lanval can sincerely say, / what she orders, he'll obey."⁶⁵ Though Thomas Chestre uses less concrete transactional language than Marie de France, Dame Tryamour is still depicted as willingly choosing to engage in sexual activity while maintaining her power over Sir Launfal: "For play, lytyll they sclepte that nyght, / Tyll on morn hyt was

⁶⁴ *Lanval*, ll. 133-134

⁶⁵ *Lanval*, ll. 151-152

daylyght. / Sche badd hym aryse anoon”⁶⁶ [They slept little that night, such was their amorous joy! When it was dawn, Tryamour told him to rise.] The use of “play” clearly indicates that their relationship was consensual and the fact that she can order him to arise immediately and leave her reveals that she has control over their interactions. Through their ability to maintain authority over their lovers despite offering up something so integral to their identities (their body), the narrators highlight the difference between female characters who operate within the social structure (the virgin martyrs) and those who do not (the fairy mistresses). The narrators do not need to force the fairy mistresses to adhere to the society’s expectations of condemnation for sexually promiscuous women and can allow them to gain power through this aspect of their identity because of their status as an ‘other’; this autonomy directly opposes the virgin martyrs whose surrendering of their bodies to God relinquishes ultimate authority over their lives to God.

Thomas’ lover is distinct from the previous two fairy lovers because she seems to have less personal investment in the relationship. Though in *Thomas off Ersseldoune* the mistress seems more ambivalent than eager to take on the status of lover, she still permits him to lay with her: “Seuene sythis by hir he laye.”⁶⁷ [Seven times he lay by her.] Lanval’s lover and Dame Tryamour seem to engage in the relationship because they want to, however, Thomas’ lover is depicted as more reluctant and annoyed by Thomas’ sexual attention. Whereas in Lanval and Sir Launfal, the fairy mistresses are able to order or command certain actions from their human lovers, Thomas’ lover is shown pleading with him to leave her alone:

Scho sayd, ‘mane, the lykes thy playe:

Whate byrde in boure maye delle with the?

Thou merrys me all þis longe daye,

⁶⁶ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 349-351

⁶⁷ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, l. 124

I praye the, Thomas, late me bee!’⁶⁸

[She said, ‘companion, you like your play: What bird in the bower may deal with you?

You have enjoyed me all of this long day, I pray that you, Thomas, let me be!]

Her statement that he enjoys his ‘playe’ implies that she was not as enthusiastic as him, or that she tires of his company in a way that he does not tire of hers, and directly contrasts the consensual language used in *Sir Launfal* that clearly states they both engaged in ‘play.’ Instead, she asks him to leave her alone, presenting a very different level of authority than the previous fairy lovers demonstrated. Her sexuality seems less of a tool which she wants to use and more like the author’s attempt to conform to the trope of the fairy mistress as a desirous lover because that seems like the only authentic way for her to exist in the company of a male figure. While she is certainly not a victim in this interaction, her characterization allows for a more nuanced understanding of the fairy lover trope as her authority over her lover, while still present, is not as concrete. A medieval audience would be familiar with the trope presented and would likely recognize the difference with which Thomas’ lover is presented. If, as we assume, the audience believes in the world of fairies and perceives their potential power and authority to affect change in the human world, the dilution of Thomas’ lover’s authority throughout the story could be an indication of an attempt to anticipate the audience’s uneasiness surrounding the ‘other’ infringing upon their known world and provide a more palatable female fairy. Marie de France and Thomas Chestre do not necessarily demonstrate the same anxiety over audience perception in their works. This difference may point to an increasing apprehension regarding the mystical and magical ‘other’ or may convey a greater concern for fairies who influence the mortal world through an expression of prophecy rather than being merely limited to physical engagement because of the

⁶⁸ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll.125-128

scope of the potential ramifications for each. The next chapter will examine in more depth the differences in the ways the female characters access the other to influence the mortal world.

The Female Body: Strength and Vulnerability

Both the virgin martyrs and the fairy mistresses locate a significant portion of their identity and power in their bodies; however, the texts demonstrate that their bodies are also quite vulnerable throughout their stories. Whether through violence or simply by exposing their bodies, the women's bodies are susceptible to potential danger. During these moments of vulnerability and exposure, the women still exhibit considerable power by allowing themselves to be vulnerable and to endure the consequences of their vulnerability. The virgin martyrs and the fairy mistresses go about allowing themselves to be vulnerable in different ways and for different reasons; the virgin martyrs allow themselves to be physically abused and allow their bodies to be broken in the name of the Lord, while the fairy lovers expose their bodies in order to draw in their male lover. According to common medieval thought, women were the "most vulnerable and carnal of human beings"⁶⁹ and as such tend to either be weak or serve as a temptation for men, with men being naturally stronger and more invulnerable. This section will examine the idea that "weakness can prevail over strength"⁷⁰. We will see the saints' power in these moments of vulnerability stem from their willingness to allow their bodies to be destroyed in order to maintain their religious commitment. In these situations, vulnerability, rather than the brute strength demonstrated by man, conveys a greater sense of power. Meanwhile, the fairy lovers consistently expose themselves, making them "dangerously unprotected, revealed, and vulnerable to attack."⁷¹ The female body has always been more open to assault than male bodies

⁶⁹ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 12

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 12

⁷¹ Breuer, *Crafting the Witch*, p.17

and the act of willingly removing all physical protection and opening themselves up to potential harm (particularly rape) at the hands of men confirms that the fairy mistresses are supposed to be considered in complete control over what happens to their bodies. They need not fear physical assaults because they are masters of their own bodies and are not subject to a higher authority which might demand their bodies be brutalized for a greater purpose. Both the virgin martyrs and the fairy mistresses exhibit substantial manifestations of power in times of vulnerability, however, whereas the saints possess greater levels of power when their bodies are defenseless, the fairy lovers retain more authority in these moments. This distinction raises a few important questions that will be addressed throughout the rest of this section as well as the following two chapters: How would an audience have distinguished between power and authority in key moments of the stories? Would female audience members internalize discussions of the female body to reflect the culture's value of women for their physical form? How does the saints' and fairies' status as either connected to an 'other' (God) or actually being an 'other' (a Fae) impact how the audience would interpret their relationships to power and authority, both in terms of their bodies (as is the case in this chapter) and in terms of their actions (as we will see in the following chapters)?

All three virgin martyrs in the Katherine Group possess the ability to endure incredible violence for the sake of their belief system. The female saints' desire to keep their bodies 'pure' by religious standards and their refusal to bow to the wishes of the men in their lives makes their bodies provocative to their adversaries; violence is, therefore, the physical manifestation of the men's obsession with corrupting or possessing the 'pure' female body. The male figures in these legends seem unhinged by their fervent lust for the women and Juliana's legend highlights this as the narrator states,

Ant inwith bearnde of brune swa ant cwakede, as of calde, thet him thuhte in his thonc
 thet ne bede he i the worlt nanes cunnes blisse bute hire bodi ane, to wealden hire with
 wil efter thet he walde.

[And inside he burned from fire so and quaked, as if from cold, that it seemed to him in
 his mind that he wanted no kind of bliss in the world but her body alone, to possess her
 with his will according to what he wished.]

Eleusius, Juliana's would-be lover, becomes single-mindedly obsessed with Juliana's body and
 when his desire is thwarted, he, like all the other male figures, resorts to violence in the face of
 an unattainable female body. In violent situations, however, the saints impress upon the reader
 their ambivalence toward preserving their life over their virginity. Saint Katherine clearly states
 "Alle thine threatas ne drede ich...riht noht!.. Do nu thenne hihendliche thet tu havest on heorte,
 for of me ne schalt tu biyeote nawiht mare" [I do not fear all your threats... not at all!... Do now
 then quickly what you have in your heart, for from me you will get nothing more] which
 emboldens her adversary while shifting the expected power dynamic from the torturer to the
 victim. She encourages him to satisfy his bloodlust that her body brings out in him because all he
 can take from her is "thet lif of mi licome" [the life of my body] even as she is beaten so that
 "hire leofliche lich litherede al a blode" [her lovely body became lathered all in blood].
 Katherine draws an important distinction here that is only implied in the other virgin martyr
 saints' legends as she separates her body from her 'self.' The only thing that her adversary, the
 king, can destroy is her body, not her commitment to God or her vow of virginity that is
 promised protection by God. The same pattern in which the female saint verbally refuses to give
 in to demands on her body and is aggressively tortured appears in the remaining two
 hagiographic legends. In the legends of Saint Juliana and Saint Margaret, the saints are each

tortured until they are in shreds: “hire leofliche lich...litheri o blode” [her lovely body (was) lathered in blood” and “ hire leofliche lich... brec overal ant litherede o blode” [her lovely body...burst forth overall and was lathered in blood] respectively. The repetition between texts referencing the beauty of their bodies and variations on the word ‘lathered’ lead to a consistent expectation that virgin martyrs’ bodies are both defined by their desirable beauty and inevitably viewed as inconsequential in contrast to their devotion to God by the saints. Juliana’s powerful endurance can be seen when she reaches her breaking point and still refuses to yield to her adversaries:

Ah heo hit al thudeliche tholede for Drihtin, ant hwen ha felde meast sar, sikerlukest seide, ‘Haldeth longe ne leave ye neaver for nulle ich leaven His luvethet ich on leve ne for luvethet nowther ne for luther eie.’

[But she patiently endured it all for the Lord, and when she felt the worst, she said most certainly, ‘Keep it up for a while and do not ever stop, for I will not leave His love which I believe in, neither for love nor for any wickedness.’]

The narrator specifically states that she endures everything for the Lord and Juliana herself informs her tormentors that her belief in God is the most important part of her life and all worldly pains mean nothing to her. Saint Margaret hints at why these saintly women are so persistent in their belief: the promise of rewards in heaven. She tells her captors,

Ich wulle bitechen mi bodi to eaver- euich bitternesse thet tu const on bithenchen, ne bite hit ne se sare with thon thet Ich mote meidene mede hebben in Heovene. Drihtin deide for us, the deorwurthe Lauerd, ant ne drede Ich na deth forto drehen for Him. He haveth His merke on me iseiled with His in-seil; ne mei unc lif ne deth nother twemen otwa.

[I will commit my body to every cruelty that you can contrive, and may it bite never so sorely provided that I may as a maiden have my reward in Heaven. The Ruler died for us, the dear Lord, and I am not afraid to endure death for Him. He has sealed His mark upon me with His seal, and neither life nor death can divide us in two.]

The promise of unification with God in Heaven is enough to motivate Margaret, as well as Katherine and Juliana, to endure any worldly abuse. In these moments in which the women are physically tortured, through God's authority, they are able to impress upon their adversaries that they are not bothered because they do not pose a threat to what the women truly care about: preserving their virginity so they might be rewarded in the next life. In this way, even while their bodies are at their most vulnerable, and are in fact being destroyed, the saints' connection to the divine allows them to endure unimaginable torment.

While only the saints face violence against their bodies, the female naked body is presented in both the hagiographic and romance texts, linking the idea of vulnerability with nakedness; however, the way in which the women present their bodies indicates that even in the midst of their physical exposure, they maintain power over the situation. The virgin martyrs and the fairy lovers appear naked in their stories for very different reasons: the saints are stripped in order to be humiliated and beaten, while the fairies are hypersexualized. The saints' lives again use remarkably similar language when describing the ways in which the virgins' bodies are stripped and prepared for brutalization. In all cases, the order to strip and beat the woman comes from her male adversary who is blinded by his rage at being refused:

Saint Katherine: Het o wodi wise strupen hire steort-naket ant beaten hire beare flesch ant hire freoliche bodi with cnottede schurgen. [In a mad fashion he ordered her stripped stark naked and her bare flesh and her beautiful body beaten with knotted scourges.]

Saint Juliana: Ant het his heathene men strupin hire steort-naket ant strecchen o ther eorthe, ant hwil thet eaver six men mahten idrehen, beaten hire beare bodi [and commanded his heathen men to strip her stark-naked and to stretch her upon the earth, and for six men to beat her bare body]

Saint Margaret: Strupeth hire steort-naket ant hongeth hire on heh up, ant beteth hire bere bodi with bittere besmen [Strip her stark-naked and hang her high up, and beat her bare body with cruel rods.]

Saint Margaret's legend goes on to emphasize the goal of all of the male adversaries as it states: "The driveles unduhtie swa duden sone, thet te hude snawhwit swartede as hit snercte, ant bearst on to bleinin as hit aras overal" [The worthless drudges did so at once so that her snow-white skin blackened as it scorched, and burst into blisters as it rose up everywhere.] These lines depict the naked body of Margaret as the ultimate source of purity as it is compared to the brilliant whiteness of snow. Olibrius' order to burn her body results in the blackening of her skin, which suggests that the goal of the male oppressors in the stories is to corrupt and defile the virgin's purity. It is their virginity which makes them a target and their virginity, through their connection to God, which protects them. In an extension of their power gained through their divine connection, the saints all show a remarkable indifference to their bodies being exposed because of their aforementioned belief in divine protection of their virginity. They do not allow themselves to be dominated or overcome by the expected humiliation at their bodies being so exposed and brutalized. Instead, they each indicate their complete trust in God's authority over what happens to their bodies, highlighting that their captors hold no power over them: Katherine "hit lihtliche aber ant lahinde tholede," [bore it lightly and suffered it laughing.] illustrating her utter lack of belief in her adversary's ability to compromise what she truly holds dear; Margaret

calls on the “halewende fur of the Hali Gast” [healing fire of the Holy Ghost] suggesting she believes the Holy Spirit will not allow her to be permanently destroyed; and Juliana encourages her foes to keep carrying out their infernal orders because she knows demons cannot overpower her as long as she has divine protection when she states: “Doth...deofles limen al thet te deoflen — hwas driveles ye beoth — driveth ow te donne” [Do...you devil’s limbs, all that the devils — whose drudges you are — drive you to do.] The saints’ virgin bodies being naked and on display in front of countless people is meant to degrade and defile their purity, however, they do not care for their flesh because their souls and their maidenhood belong to God, empowering them to endure the world’s attempts to shame them.

Though the fairy mistresses’ bodies are never subjected to worldly persecution and therefore are not depicted with the same strength and endurance in the face of violated vulnerability, the Fae women in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* do use their naked bodies to wield their power over their male lovers. Lanval’s lover and Dame Tryamour’s naked bodies are primarily highlighted in two situations: their love affairs with their mortal knight and the beauty contest which liberates their lover from prison. When Lanval and Sir Launfal first meet their fairy lovers, they are confronted with the women’s naked bodies laid in a bed. Dame Tryamour is presented simply as follows: “For hete her clothes down sche dede / Almost to her gerdylstede / Than lay sche uncovert”⁷² [Because of the heat, she had put down her clothes almost to her girdle; and as she lay uncovered] Meanwhile, Lanval’s lover gets a detailed description as the narrator emphasizes the exposure of her body:

In just her slip she was clothèd.

Her body was well-shaped, and sweet.

⁷² *Sir Launfal*, ll.289-291

A rich mantle of white ermine,
 Lined with silk, alexandrine,
 Was her quilt, but she'd pushed it away,
 On account of the heat; she didn't hide
 Her face, neck, breast, her whole side.⁷³

As an introductory scene, both in terms of the knights meeting their lovers and the audience establishing their mental perception of the fairies, it is important to note the extent of the women's exposure and the effect that it has on the male knights. Both of these fairy women have summoned their knight from the middle of the woods and are welcoming him into their chambers while they recline in a clearly vulnerable position, however, they do not fear the presence of the knights as they open themselves up to potential threats to their body. It is unusual to see female characters in such a position without either coming under threat from a male perpetrator or being condemned by the narrator for her role as a temptress. Instead, these fairy lovers are secure enough in their status as one of the Fae which gives them utter control over events and exempts them from repercussions for their sexuality. This treatment allows the audience to recognize how the fairies are held to a different standard than other female characters, including the saints, because they operate outside the typical power hierarchy.

While the extent of the authority and power over men demonstrated by the fairy lovers will be further explored in the next chapter, we must note here that the second primary display of their hypersexualized naked bodies demonstrates how the root of their authority is partially located in their body. The impetus behind the climax of *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* is the superior beauty of the fairy mistresses over the Queen. In each, the male knight has boasted of his lover's

⁷³ *Lanval*, ll. 99-105

beauty and as a result lost both his lover and his freedom; this leads to the pivotal moment in which Lanval's lover and Dame Tryamour show up to confirm the truth of their respective knight's boast. In front of the entire court, including King Arthur, Lanval's lover disrobes herself: "So she can be seen from all sides./ She drops her cloak upon the floor,/ So that they all can see her more."⁷⁴ In similar fashion, Dame Tryamour "Sche dede of her mantyll on the flet,/ That men schuld her beholde the bet,/ Wythoute a more sojour"⁷⁵ [She removed her cloak so that all might see her.] Each story specifically states that her intention in stripping herself is so that she may be viewed more fully by her audience in the court. Therefore, while she is clearly a sex object throughout the narrative, her disrobing does not serve to degrade, humiliate, or ridicule her, but to allow her audience to marvel at her body. The implications of the fairy mistresses' ability to free their lovers will be examined later, but the narrative use of the naked female body is valuable to note alongside the virgin martyr saints' depiction in their legends.

There are many shared images and elements between the hagiographic and romance texts being examined: the beautiful female body, women in vulnerable positions, nakedness on display. As previously discussed, both of these genres have the tendency to function in a semi-didactic manner for their audiences. The female members of the audiences, therefore, have two drastically different perspectives on the female body and women's ability to possess agency over their bodies presented to them. On one hand, God's protection over a 'pure' female body is what enables women's agency while on the other hand, it is the woman's authority over her own body that allows her power. Based on the importance of these genres in the cultural consciousness of the Middle Ages, it is reasonable to assume that the audience members would be able to distinguish the nuance between how each woman is able to use and control her body and

⁷⁴ *Lanval*, ll. 605-607

⁷⁵ *Sir Launfal*, ll.979-981

understand the importance of varying sources of authority. Both the saints' and the fairy lovers exist outside of the norm, however, only the path of virginity set up by the virgin martyr saints is actually attainable for women in the Middle Ages. Operating under the medieval belief that virginity leads to an intimacy with Christ, which in turn leads to female agency under a divine authority, as demonstrated in the hagiographic legends, women's limited ability to control their bodies is the only feasible avenue available to the average medieval laywomen; in fact, many medieval women did choose to enter religious orders in order to achieve a closer relationship with God and to escape the expectation of marriage and childbearing. However, the vivid violence depicted in these texts emphasizes the possible, if not inevitable, destruction of the female body in spite of divine influence which may have been to discourage masses of women from choosing this path, encouraging women to remain capitulating to the normal patriarchal structure which places men between women and God. Though perhaps discouraged, the status as virgin, which would allow the women a certain degree of agency under God, is much more reachable than that of fairy. The complete authority ascribed to the fairy women over their bodies can therefore be seen as an impossible ideal that cannot survive in the mortal world, as the fairy lovers do not remain in the realm of humans for long. With most medieval literature viewing female characters in terms of their bodies alone, and the only relatable characters having limited control over their bodies, medieval women readers most likely could not expect to ever possess considerable authority over their own bodies and were subject to the authority of men's power over their bodies, most likely in the form of being relegated only to wife and mother roles in society. By examining the female bodies of the virgin martyr saints and the fairy mistresses, we can begin to see how the differences in power and authority manifest in medieval texts. This examination helps us better understand how sources of authority can determine the influence a

female character may have on contemporary female readers as well as reflect the medieval perspective on women's potential avenues to power and authority. In the next chapter, we will dig deeper into the role that these female characters assume within their texts and consider how this may contribute to our understanding of female agency.

Chapter 2: When Extraordinary Female Characters Circumvent the Ordinary

The identities and characterization of fairy mistresses and virgin martyr saints are so entwined with their appearance and their use of their bodies that they are almost invariably reduced to one dimensional examinations of these aspects. While it is clear that their physical aspects are integral to understanding how they function within the text and how they would be perceived by medieval audiences, the female characters being examined also demonstrate a remarkable capacity for power and authority through their actions and the roles they assume in relation to the male characters. Despite being able to wield power and authority outside what their bodies enable, their influence is still deeply rooted in their connection to divine or magical outside forces. Medieval audiences are presented with women who challenge the patriarchal hierarchy and the existing discursive structure's framework while maintaining that these challenges are, in fact, exceptional. This chapter will explore how fairy mistresses and virgin martyr saints assume roles which position them as socially, intellectually, and morally superior to their male counterparts. Through their wealth, status, knowledge, and abilities to affect change, these female characters demonstrate how a connection to otherworldly authority can elevate women and supply what the existing social structure lacks.

A Class of One's Own: Social Status and Power

It is impossible to ignore the influence of status and wealth when discussing the agency of female characters and their access to power and legitimate authority. These women do not represent the average laywoman in the Middle Ages, nor are they meant to. They are made extraordinary by their social status, role in society, and personal wealth in a way that further exempts them from being confined by the boundaries in place on women's agency. As Andrea

Hopkins readily points out, it is easy to see how these stories would reinforce medieval women reader's "sense of self-worth and the worth of womanhood in general"⁷⁶; however, it is important that we recognize the distinction in class and wealth between the common women readers' lived experience and the experiences of the female characters. This section will explore how virgin martyr saints and fairy mistresses are inherently elevated above the average layperson and how the power and authority gained through this preeminence are grounded in their connection to divine or magical sources, further separating them from reality. It may be true that in the Middle Ages, lower-status women were held to less restrictive expectations and could, in fact, demonstrate *greater* freedom in terms of how they use their bodies, but these texts demonstrate a correlation between higher status and bodily agency.

While both virgin martyr saints and fairy mistresses are socially superior to the average reader, they achieve their distinction in different ways. Sanctity in the Middle Ages was almost always predicated on the individual's meeting of prerequisites such as "worldly power, high status, and social and economic prominence"⁷⁷; these qualifications do not simply exist as a historical standard, but are also easily visible in the hagiographic legends. If we consider the saints as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne does, as a "sign of" or a "contact with" God⁷⁸, then the saints' roles both in society and within the texts are inseparable from God's authority. This trend will be explored as it relates to the repeated depiction of the saints as possessing earthly power, and being termed warriors of Christ or intercessors for humanity. Fairy mistresses, in a similar way, are privileged due to their status as Fae. As Heidi Breuer indicates, magic allows freedom from "constraints of class or religion" and "from the limits of gender, race, or species, from political

⁷⁶ Hopkins, "Female Saints and Romance Heroines: Feminine Fiction and Faith among the Literate Elite." p. 138

⁷⁷ Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100." p. 102

⁷⁸ Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture 1150-1300*. p. 108

boundaries and physical obstacles.”⁷⁹ It is this freedom enabled by magic that establishes the Fae women in a class of their own, superior to any class accessible to lay women readers. This section will reveal how the fairies’ status as Fae allows them to be depicted as the top of the worldly social hierarchy in terms of class and wealth, often through comparisons to human male social class or wealth.

The virgin martyrs are depicted as substantially powerful women throughout their legends with frequent references to their earthly power or their connection with Christ, both as ‘warriors’ and intercessors. As previously mentioned, the medieval audience would expect certain elements in the making of a saint, all of which center on their difference from the average--whether through noble lineage or social standing, these women are exceptional. The ‘worldly power’ expected of them is seen in all three legends in the Katherine group through their noble lineage or upper-class birthright. As I briefly touched on in the last chapter, Saint Katherine is the most overtly recognized of the three saints in terms of worldly power; from a young age she was already entrusted with the power to rule judiciously over her parents’ household and land: “ha heold hire ealdrene hird wisliche ant warliche i the eritage ant i the eard thet com hire of burde” [she looked after her parents’ household wisely and prudently in the inheritance and in the land which came to her by birth.] The previous chapter touched on the fact that Katherine’s royal status differentiates her from the average laywoman or noblewoman, but it is important to also understand the extent to which her royal powers contribute to her recognition as a powerful agent in the eyes of the pagan characters. While Saint Juliana was a “freoi-boren burde” [nobly born lady] and Saint Margaret was the daughter of “thet hethene folc patriarche ant prince” [that heathen folk patriarch and prince] and was much loved by her community, the

⁷⁹ Breuer, *Crafting the Witch*, p. 7

extent of their power is generally only recognized by their adversaries in relation to God's authority. Katherine, however, demonstrated an incredible capacity to learn and understand difficult concepts and was "iset...earliche to lare" [set early to learning] where, the narrator states that through the Holy Spirit, she surpassed all others. In this passage, the narrator makes it clear to readers that God is responsible for Katherine's scholarly success, but the characters within the story attribute her skill to her own abilities stating that "ha with hire anes mot meistreth us alle" [she with her reasoning alone masters us all] and they "cwethen hire the meistrie ant te menske al up" [granted her the victory and the honor completely]. While Juliana and Margaret are traded between male figures like chattel despite their status as noblewomen with limited power, the pagan scholars in *The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine* readily acknowledge Katherine alone for her intellectual prowess which has dominated all male figures in the kingdom. This willingness seems to stem from Katherine's elevated social standing because this is one of the only key differences between her and the other saints. Because she is already recognized as possessing limited worldly power, the pagans more readily acknowledge her intellectual abilities; the author, however, ensures that the audience understands the origin of her abilities, as Katherine clarifies that her power comes from God:

Cost hehte mi feader, ant habbe ihavet hiderto swithe hehe meistres. Ah forthi thet te lare thet heo me learden limpeth to idel yelp, ant falleth to biyete to wurthschipe of the worlde, ne ne helpeth nawiht eche lif to haben, ne yelpe ich nawiht therof. Ah sone se ich seh the leome of the sothe lare the leadeth to thet eche lif, ich leafde al thet other ant toc me Him to Lauerd ant makede Him mi leofmon, the theos word seide thurh an of His witegen: *Perdam sapientiam sapientum et intellectum intelligentium reprobabo*. 'Ich

chulle fordo the wisdom of theos wise world-men,' He seith, 'ant awarpen the wit of these world-witti.'

[My father was called Cost, and I have had hitherto very great teachers. But because the learning that they taught me pertains to idle boasting, and belongs to profit for worship of the world, and does not at all help anyone have eternal life, I do not at all boast of it. But as soon as I saw the light of the true learning that leads to that eternal life, I renounced all the rest, and took Him to me as Lord and made Him my lover, who said these words through one of His prophets: *Perdam sapientiam sapientum et intellectum intellegentium reprobabo*. 'I will destroy the wisdom of these wise worldly ones,' He says, 'and cast down the wit of these worldly-wise ones.']

Katherine first highlights her worldly connections to royalty and all the access to learning that that provides and then condemns the insignificance of worldly knowledge; she quotes scripture in order to place the authority and power completely in God's hands, clarifying that her outsmarting the pagan scholars is merely God fulfilling the prophecy that He will destroy worldly wisdom by using her as His agent. Therefore, even Katherine, the virgin martyr saint with the most recognized worldly power, is ultimately merely an agent of God's authority, fulfilling His will and acting as a proxy for His divine power. All three of the Katherine Group saints possess above average worldly status by belonging to noble and royal classes, distancing them from their readers in terms of the social hierarchy and the access to power that that provides. By qualifying the tangible power that the female saints have that average laywomen would never be able to access, the authors of the hagiographic legends further perpetuate the unrealistic nature of the extent of their power.

Despite the explicit focus on Katherine's worldly power while Juliana and Margaret only receive limited acknowledgement of their social rank, the latter two saints are firmly distinguished with the status 'warriors of Christ'. The Early and High Medieval culture in which these legends were created, gained traction, and attracted popular attention greatly valued the warrior ethos and the idea of being a physical champion of your beliefs. This trend can be seen in the numerous heroic ethics and courtly romances which feature warriors and knights willing to fight and sacrifice for their belief system. For Juliana and Margaret to be named and depicted in similar terms elevates them to a position in the power hierarchy that is generally regarded with great respect and admiration. Margaret is most clearly assigned the elevated status as the narrator praises Margaret and expounds upon how saints are warriors for Christ:

as icudde kempen, overcomen ant akeasten hare threo cunne van, the veont, ant teos
wake worlt, ant hare licomes lustes, ant wenden of theos weanen to weole ant to eche
wunne icrunet to Criste.

[as well-known warriors, they overcame and cast down their three kinds of foes, the
fiend, and this weak world, and the lusts of their bodies, and they went from these woes
to prosperity and everlasting joy, crowned to Christ.]

The narrator of Margaret's legend establishes that all saints are to be considered warriors as they serve to protect and glorify the kingdom of Christ. Drawing an even more concrete parallel between the description of Christ's warriors and Margaret, the narrator then praises Margaret, stating:

thet eadie meiden, Margarete bi nome, feht with the feond ant with his eorthliche limen,
ant overcom ant acaste ham, ant biyet hit iwriten of the writers tha, al hire passiuon ant
hire pinfule deth thet ha dreh for Drihtin.

[that blessed maiden, Margaret by name, fought with the fiend and with his earthly followers, and overcame and cast them down, and I gained hold of that which was written by the writers then concerning all her suffering and her painful death that she endured for the Ruler.]

The linguistic parallel between the narrator's description of the warrior saints and the praise of Margaret's actions as she fights the devil, overcomes earthly opposition, and is martyred for Christ draws attention to Margaret's actions as those becoming a heroic warrior. Throughout her story, she endures endless tortures, but she also inflicts pain on her demonic tormenter:

Margarete grap thet grisliche thing, thet hire ne agras nawiht, ant heteveste toc him bi thet eateliche top ant hef him up ant duste him dunriht to ther eorthe, ant sette hire riht fot on his ruhe swire

[Margaret gripped that grisly thing, which did not terrify her in any way, and grabbed him cruelly, took him by that hideous hair on his head, and heaved him up and flung him straight down to the earth, and set her right foot on his shaggy neck]

As just one instance of her aggressive action, she demonstrates a willingness to physically engage in battle against those who oppose God's will, a theme which is consistent throughout her story. Her ability to wrestle with a demon and ultimately end up pinning him to the ground solidifies in the mind of the reader the connection between other warriors they may have knowledge of and the actions of Margaret, and indeed all saints. Though never definitively called a warrior, Juliana is depicted using the same violently physical language: "Juliene the eadie openede hire ehnen ant biheold towart him, as he thus seide; ant tet bali blencte, ant breid him ayeinwart bihinden hare schuldren as for a schoten arew" [Juliana the blessed opened her eyes and looked toward him as he said thus, and that evil one flinched and sprang backwards behind

their shoulders as if in fear of a fired arrow.] In this description, the narrator compares Juliana's gaze with the strike of an arrow so that Juliana herself seems to embody a weapon (perhaps wielded by God?) intent on defending Christ. Like Margaret, Juliana also exercises the same power over demonic foes as she beats Belial of Hell:

Ant stondinde o the steorve, nom hire ahne bondes ant bigon to beaten then Belial of Helle, ant he to rarin reowliche, to yuren ant to yein, ant heo leide on se lutherliche that wa wes him o Live.

[And, standing on top of that pestilent creature, she seized her own bonds and began then to beat Belial of Hell, and he began to howl pitifully, to yowl and yell, and she laid on so fiercely that he was sorry to be alive.]

The similarities between the maidens' abilities to overcome and physically brutalize their enemies and echo the expectations placed on medieval warriors empowers these women as active agents and does not relegate them simply to the role of victim. Allowing these women to epitomize such a respected upper echelon of society imbues them with a power recognizable to their pagan opponents. The complication lies in the recurring question throughout this project of whether these women would be viewed by their medieval audience as having personal access to power or merely being pawns in a greater system of authority which only allows women power when it serves a necessary purpose. There is an important distinction between Katherine's power gained through her royal family ties and Margaret and Juliana's warrior status gained through their relationship with Christ; Katherine's power, though she acknowledges Christ's influence, also has a foundation within the worldly patriarchal structure whereas Margaret and Juliana's power comes solely from an outside force. In each case, however, the author always ties the female character's power back to God, even when it has a basis in the worldly power structure,

whether through royal blood or heroic connotations, furthering the exceptional nature of their influence based on their unusual class alignments.

Though the saints' access to power does have demonstrable differences, all three maidens are classed as intercessors to Christ, and are accepted in the stories as uncommon female representations. The role of intercessor is not particular to virgin martyr saints, though all three maidens in the Katherine Group were and are venerated for their intercession to God on behalf of humanity. In the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for religious and lay persons to "enjoy regular 'conversations' with particular saints and to strike prayerful pacts (*promessas*) with them in return for supernatural intercession."⁸⁰ The role of religious intercessor was valued during the Middle Ages for many reasons; one of the most influential being that it fulfilled "a need to compensate for the abstractness of an existing yet distant God."⁸¹ Saints are situated between God and the rest of humanity and are venerated for their ability to act as a conduit by which humanity can build a closer relationship to the divine. This role further affords the female saints a status and power unattainable to the average medieval reader. The saints' role of intercessor is not simply implied due to their sainthood, but the texts specifically draw attention to this aspect of the maidens. Christ himself speaks to Katherine and highlights, along with the fact that she is His "leofmon," [lover] that she is His agent and humanity is connected to Him through her: "Na thing ne dret tu, for Ich am eaver with the, do thet me do the, ant monie schulen thurh the yet turne to Me" [And dread you nothing, for I am ever with you, let be done what may be done to you, and many will yet turn to Me through you.] Christ clearly states that Katherine will be an

⁸⁰ Mayblin, Maya. "People Like Us: Intimacy, Distance, and the Gender of Saints." *Current Anthropology: The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions*, Vol. 55, No. S10, December 2014, pp. S273

⁸¹ D'abreu, Zé. "On Charisma, Mediation & Broken Screens." *Etnofoor*, 2002, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, 2002, pp. 241

integral cause behind a portion of humanity's salvation. In a similar fashion, the narrator of Juliana's legend states:

alle leawede men the understonden ne mahen Latines ledene, litheth ant lusteth the liflade of a meiden, thet is of Latin iturnd to Englische leode, with thon thet teos hali leafdi in Heovene luvie us the mare, ant thurh this lihinde lif leade us to thet eche, thurh hire eadi erndunge, thet Crist is swithe icweme.

[all unlearned people who cannot understand the language of Latin, hear and listen to the life of a maiden which is translated from Latin into the English language, so that this holy lady in Heaven may love us the more, and through this deceitful life may lead us to that eternal one, through her blessed intercession, which is very pleasing to Christ.]

While implied in Katherine's story, Juliana's legend takes the role of intercessor a step further as it points out that the audience for this vernacular hagiographic text will inevitably reach more people than Latin texts and will therefore serve as an access point to Christ for lay persons.

Continuing the connection between the maiden's role as intercessor and a very real understanding on behalf of the audience of the importance of this role, Margaret's story exhorts the audience to remember Margaret in their prayers so that she may intercede on their behalf and they may be admitted to heaven:

in ower beoden blitheluker munneth this meiden, thet ha with the bonen thet ha bed on eorthe bidde yet for ow i the blisse of Heovene... Ant we bituhe the engles, thurh hire erndunge, moten yet iseo hire ant heren hire singen.

[All those who have devotedly listened to this: remember in your prayers this maiden more happily, so that she with the prayers that she made on earth may still intercede for

you in the bliss of Heaven... And we among the angels, because of her intercession, may yet see her and hear her sing.]

All three texts bring the maidens' roles as intercessors to the forefront in order to highlight the power, responsibility, and respect that accompany such a role; the texts, however, also stress the extraordinary nature of their capacity to influence and cause change by consistently attributing their high status and resulting power to divine influence.

Because the fairy mistresses' authority originates outside of the worldly patriarchal and religious hierarchies, unlike the power of the virgin martyrs, their wealth and social standing seem to supercede all of those in the human realm, emphasizing the superiority of the power they wield and the unattainability of their authority. In the Middle Ages, it would be unusual to find an independently wealthy woman who did not gain her money through family relations or widowhood; because of this, it is remarkable that all three fairy women have unrivaled wealth with an obscure source. In *Lanval*, the fairy lover is said to have such luxurious possessions that, "No King, under heaven, with all his wealth, / could ever buy any of this for himself."⁸² The narrator draws a direct comparison between the wealth and power possible by worldly kings and that of the Fae women. The narrators of both *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* do not, however, leave this wealth up to the audience's imagination; instead, they paint a detailed picture of the overabundance of riches in the women's possession, even while comparing it to famous wealthy rulers throughout history. *Lanval's* lover's wealth is described as follows:

Semiramis, Queen of Babylon,
 When her power was on the rise,
 And she was so rich as well as so wise,

⁸² *Lanval*, ll. 91-92

Or Octavian, who ruled the whole map,
 Couldn't have paid for one tent-flap.
 On top was set an eagle, pure gold;
 How much it cost, more or less--
 Or the cords or the poles to hold
 Up the tent walls--I couldn't guess.⁸³

Meanwhile, Dame Tryamour's wealth is depicted in equally extravagant terms, however, the comparison is now drawn between King Arthur and the fairy mistress:

The pavyloun was wrouth, forsothe, ywys,
 All of werk of Sarsynys,
 The pomelles of crystall;
 Upon the toppe an ern ther stod
 Of bournede golde, ryche and good,
 Ylorysched wyth ryche amall.
 Hys eyn wer carbonkeles bryght -
 As the mone they schon anyght,
 That spreteth out ovyr all.
 Alysaundre the conquerour,
 Ne Kyng Artour yn hys most honour,
 Ne hadde noon scwych juell!⁸⁴

[It was truly the work of Saracens; the pommels were all of crystal and upon the top stood an eagle of fine burnished gold decorated with rich enamel. Its eyes were bright

⁸³ *Lanval*, ll. 82-90

⁸⁴ *Sir Launfal*, ll.265-276

carbuncles which shone by night as brightly as the moon that sheds her rays over all.

Neither Alexander the conqueror, nor King Arthur at the height of his glory, had ever had such jewels!]

The narrators of both *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* seem incredulous at the exorbitant wealth displayed by the fairy women, and their focus on the small details which make up the usually mundane object of the tent only serve to further contrast the banal with the extraordinary; the common objects found in the human world are transformed into something awe-inspiring by their connection to the fairies. This display of fairy wealth altering the ordinary into the extraordinary foreshadows the women's role as benefactor in the lives of their lovers; meanwhile, the repeated references to the inability of worldly rulers to compare to the wealth and status of the fairies suggests a shortcoming in society that can only be satisfied by otherworldly means. While *Lanval* mentions important historical rulers, *Sir Launfal* directly compares Dame Tryamour with King Arthur. As will be examined later in this chapter, both versions of this story highlight the fact that King Arthur's court is flawed and cannot satisfy the needs of its members. Even Thomas' lover, who occasionally lacks many of the typical characteristics of fairy mistresses, is depicted with extraordinary wealth:

Stefly sett with precyous stones,
 And compaste all with crapotee,
 Stones of Oryente, grete plente;
 Hir hare abowte hir hede it hange;...
 Hir garthes of nobyll sylke þay were,
 The bukylls were of Berelle stone,
 Hir steraps were of crystalle clere,

And all with perelle ouer-by-gone.⁸⁵

[Firmly adorned with precious stones, and all surrounded with toad-stone, a great plenty of stones from the Orient; Hir hair hung about her face;...her horse's belt was then of noble silk, the buckles were made from Beryl stone, her stirrups were made from clear crystal, and all overcome with pearls.]

Even moreso than the previous two stories, the narrator of *Tomas off Ersseldoune* highlights the nature of the woman's riches. Focusing on the rarities surrounding and adorning the woman and her horse contributes to the notion that the fairy women's wealth is exceptional and unattainable by worldly means. As the descriptions of wealth occur when the reader first encounters the fairy lovers and were yet unaware of the complete significance of the fairies in the story, the readers would be aware of certain tropes throughout romances of fairies acting in a 'wish fulfillment' role for their human companions. While the ways in which they go about serving this function will be further examined later, it is important to note that from the reader's first encounter, they are bombarded with imagery of unprecedented wealth that distinguishes the fairies from the human world and clearly puts them in a superior position to even the greatest of worldly kings, even to King Arthur himself.

While the fairies' obvious wealth allows the audience to immediately recognize the ways in which they are of a distinguished degree, as the stories continue, the fairies' high social standing becomes even more pronounced through their notable power over fellow fairies as well as mortals, increasing the extraordinary nature of their authority. Even among the Fae, the fairy mistresses being examined here hold a superior level of influence. In *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*, the fairy lovers have an assembly of fairy maidens at their command, willing to do anything the fairy

⁸⁵ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll. 51-69

mistress wants. *Sir Launfal* depicts “gentyll maydenes two”⁸⁶ [two gentle maidens] approaching Launfal in order to convey a message: “Dame Tryamour, / Bad thou schuldest com speke wyth here”⁸⁷ [Dame Tryamour, requests you to come and speak with her.] These maidens clearly act as agents of Dame Tryamour and are later referred to by Launfal as his “lemmannes lothlekest mayde”⁸⁸ [beloved’s most loathsome servant] solidifying the idea that Dame Tryamour is at the top of an external power hierarchy reserved for the Fae *and* that she has authority over the fairy maidens in the story. The idea of the fairy lover possessing authority within the Fae hierarchy is furthered as the fairy maidens in *Lanval* explicitly admit their subservience to the fairy mistress as they first address Lanval:

Lord Lanval, the lady we owe duty--

A lady of valor, wisdom, beauty--

It's for you our lady has sent

Us.⁸⁹

The narrator of *Lanval* does not leave much room for interpretation when they clarify that the maidens are acting as servants of Lanval’s eventual lover; the narrator does, however, remain ambiguous as to why the fairy mistress is so authoritative, perhaps in the attempt to allow the mystery to provoke the imagination of the reader as to the extent of her authority. On the other hand, as is the case with Saint Katherine, the narrator of *Sir Launfal* explains the superior position of the Dame Tryamour by giving her a royal pedigree:

The kynges doughter of Olyroun,

Dame Tryamour that hyghte;

⁸⁶ *Sir Launfal*, l. 231

⁸⁷ *Sir Launfal*, l. 255-56

⁸⁸ *Sir Launfal*, l. 779

⁸⁹ *Lanval*, ll. 71-74

Her fadyr was Kyng of Fayrye,
 Of Occient, fer and nyghe,
 A man of mochell myghte.⁹⁰

[Dame Tryamour, daughter of the King of Olyroun, king of all the fairies of the Occident,
 and a man of great power.]

In doing this, the narrator creates a patriarchal power structure in the world of the Fae as well and clarifies that Dame Tryamour is so powerful because of her royal status and familial connection to a powerful man. It is interesting to note that the narrator states her father “was” King of the Fae, implying either that he has died or has conceivably transferred authority from himself to his daughter, resulting in her assumption of the utmost authority in the Fae world. As Jeff Rider points out, the otherworld from which the fairy mistresses derive their status is created adjacent to the mortal world, which could possibly explain the resemblance of power hierarchies: “Even though an author drew on ambient cultural traditions in creating it, a romance’s other world was a fictive world created to stand over and against the equally fictive world of its central aristocratic society.”⁹¹ The author constructs power structures with which they are comfortable and familiar and superimposes the supernatural elements. In doing so, the author creates a sense of otherworldly power that is more digestible for the text’s audience. While it may seem more impactful to allow the fairy mistress a certain air of mystery to increase her perceived authority, positioning her on top of an established hierarchy allows the reader to better understand the scope of authority allowed her. Nonetheless, both Lanval’s lover and Dame Tryamour exhibit the

⁹⁰ *Sir Launfal*, l. 278-82

⁹¹ Rider, Jeff. “The other worlds of romance.” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*. Edited by Roberta Krueger, Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 116

ability to wield power and enable others to wield power, indicating their authority to create powerful agents who can influence the mortal world in *their* name.

The maidens of Dame Tryamour and Lanval's lover demonstrate their power as agents as they are able to make demands of King Arthur in his own court. King Arthur's court, the often idealized setting of romances, would have held a profound meaning of strength, nobleness, and authority to consumers of medieval romances. Therefore, to see the handmaidens of fairy mistresses stride into the center of court and make demands on the greatest King of Britain in their perception would strike an interesting chord. The maidens in *Sir Launfal* boldly enter the court and are not concerned with anything but relaying the message of their Mistress:

At the gate they gonne alyght;
 Befor Kyng Artour gonne they wende,
 And bede hym make aredy hastyly
 A fayr chamber, for her lady
 That was come of kynges kende.⁹²

[They dismounted at the castle gate, and proceeded to stand before King Arthur. They requested him to make ready a fair chamber for their Lady, who was of royal blood.]

On the authority of Dame Tryamour, the maidens are able to make commands of the King of Britain in his own court; a similar request is made in *Lanval*, in which the maidens inform the king that their mistress "wishes to make [his] home her inn"⁹³. Lanval's King "gladly...granted this request; / two knights he called, to show them the best / rooms above"⁹⁴. However, in *Sir Launfal*, the king questions the maidens regarding the identity of their mistress to which they

⁹² *Sir Launfal*, ll. 860-864

⁹³ *Lanval*, l. 495

⁹⁴ *Lanval*, ll. 496-498

reply “Ye schull ywyte... for sche cometh ryde” [You shall know soon enough...for she now comes!] before the King “commaundede, for her sake, / The fayryst chaunber for to take / In hys palys that tyde.”⁹⁵ [commanded that the fairest chamber in his castle be prepared]. It is possible that the narrators of each story highlight this exchange in order to emphasize the generosity of the king and attempt to present a picture of the ideal court, however, the language used which connotes the maidens’ power to command generosity from the kings in the name of their fairy lady, seems to have the opposite impact; instead of the king freely offering the mysterious ladies accommodations at his court, a request (or a command, depending on how you choose to interpret the exchange) must be made in order for the king to fulfill his duties of generosity. Even without the direct presence of the fairy mistresses, the audience is aware of the authority they possess to imbue others with power enough to challenge the Arthurian court. This unseen authority manipulating the human world in its absence through the employment of active agents echoes God’s influence in the hagiographic legends through the use of the virgin martyrs. While the similarities between the Fae influence and divine influence will be further explored in the next chapter, it is important to note that this incident would likely forge a connection in the mind of the medieval audience that would color their interpretation of the fairy mistress’ role in the story and view them in very much the same omnipotent way.

Lanval and *Sir Launfal* typically present similar perspectives on the fairy mistress, as is the case with the authority attributed to the female lovers, but *Thomas off Ersseldoune*, while maintaining the fairy’s nobility, limits her power in both the real world and the fairy world, demonstrating the fact that not all fairy mistresses are perceived with as much authority as the two previously discussed. Thomas’ lover is still given the power afforded nobility as she escorts

⁹⁵ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 866-870

him “Vn-to þe castelle”⁹⁶ [unto the castle] where “Than ladyes come, bothe faire & gent, / With curtassye to hir knelande.”⁹⁷ [the ladies, both fair and genteel, come to her kneeling, with courtesy.] This action shows that Thomas’ lover not only belongs to a high enough class to freely enter into the fairy court, but is also well-positioned enough to have other fairy ladies come and kneel before her. Like Dame Tryamour and Lanval’s lover, Thomas’ lover is elevated above not just mortal men and women but fairies as well; however, unlike the previous two fairy mistresses, Thomas’ lover’s power, while great, does not indicate their possession of complete authority in the fairy world, whatever her authority may be in the mortal world. Thomas’ lover herself indicates that she is subservient within the fairy world:

And þe kynges of this Countree;...

When þou commes to one castelle gaye

My lorde es seruede at ylk a mese,

With thritty knyghttis faire & free;⁹⁸

[and the king of this country;...when you come to this singly noble castle, my lord is served at the same table with thirty knights, fair and free.]

This passage suggests a potential limitation on her authority because she is still subject to a patriarchal power structure which exists in the fairy world. While *Lanval* does not mention the power hierarchy of the fairy world and *Sir Launfal* situates Dame Tryamour in a position of authority over the power hierarchy of her fairy world, this story shows audiences that those cases are not necessarily the baseline of authority to be assumed of a fairy woman in romance texts. Constructing a power hierarchy for the fairy world and then ensuring that the fairy mistress is not

⁹⁶ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, l. 252

⁹⁷ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll. 255-6

⁹⁸ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll. 222-230

located in a position of absolute authority ensures the audience understands the limited nature of her authority and does not ascribe her the same omnipotence as the other two fairy mistresses with which the general audience is likely familiar. This qualification may be an attempt to treat the fairy mistress trope as if it belonged to the human world and had to obey the dictates of the existing discursive structure. The qualification of the elevated status of Thomas' lover may contribute to the variance we see in her overall depiction as we continue to analyze her interactions with the mortal and fairy world in the next section.

The hagiographic and romance texts both present female characters who occupy exceptional social standing and status so that the audience recognizes the abnormality of the power and authority ascribed to the women. It is no coincidence that the virgin martyrs and the fairy mistresses are depicted as members of a ruling elite or noble class; an audience who encounters these texts would be more accepting of the abilities given to women if they are recognized members of an upper class. The fact that each one of the six stories from two different genres being examined all deliberately underscore the elite class of the women in addition to their connection to the divine or magical influences serves as evidence that the power and authority being ascribed to these women requires a multi-faceted justification in order to be deemed acceptable in the Middle Ages. The next section will explore the concrete actions surrounding the female characters that are enabled by their social status and their connection to the otherworlds.

Fairies and Saints in Action and the Need for Qualification

The apparent need for authors of medieval texts (across multiple genres) to consistently qualify the power and authority of the female characters within their stories highlights the medieval anxiety around authoritative women, summed up by Eler and Kowalski as follows:

Medieval society, with its wars, territorial struggles, and violence, seems particularly hostile to the exercise of female initiative and power. Indeed, the prevailing cultural attitudes of the Middle Ages considered women, as the descendants of Eve, intellectually and emotionally inferior to men and thus incapable of wielding authority effectively.⁹⁹

As demonstrated through this study, the virgin martyr saints and fairy mistresses, arguably some of the most powerful women in the corpus of medieval literature, are continuously partially limited by their authors by the repeated emphasis on their extraordinary nature. The tendency to qualify the women's power and authority does not, however, keep the author from allowing the women opportunities to demonstrate their power and authority. Rather, the fact that the authors have justified the extent of the women's abilities seems to empower the authors to equally accentuate the manifestations of their abilities. This section will examine how the connection to the otherworld, in addition to the women's elevated status, enables their impressive depictions as the virgin martyrs show their indomitable fortitude and ability to influence events through miracles and prayers and the fairy mistresses exhibit their largesse and foreknowledge as well as their ability to satisfy the laws of the mortal world.

The virgin martyr saints use their agency throughout their stories to influence humanity through miracles, call on the authority of God through prayers, and display an intense fortitude against worldly powers. It has long been acknowledged that saints, particularly virgin martyrs, are capable of performing miracles because of their connection to the divine and the virgins of the Katherine Group are no exception. Many of the miraculous instances surrounding the saints relate to their general ability to withstand torment and will be examined later in this section; for the moment, it is important to examine the miracles surrounding their martyrdom because they

⁹⁹ Erler and Kowalski, "Introduction", p.1

demonstrate that, even in death, the saints were empowered by divine authority to enable worldly marvels. Both Saint Katherine and Saint Margaret's corpses were sources of divine healing to those who sought them. Saint Katherine's martyrdom was immediately followed by a series of miraculous events:

I thet ilke stude anan iworthen twa wundes: the an of the twa wes thet ter sprong ut mid te dunt milc imenget with blod, to beoren hire wittnesse of hire hwite meithhad; the other wes thet ter engles lihten of Heovene ant heven hire on heh up, ant beren forth hire bodi ant biburieden hit i the Munt of Synai, ther Moyses fatte the lahe et ure Lauerd, from theonne as ha deide twenti dahene yong ant yette ma, as pilegrimes the wel witen seggeth.

[In the same place immediately two wonders occurred: one of the two was that there sprang out with the blow milk mixed with blood, to bear witness to her white maidenhood; the other was that angels came down there from Heaven and lifted her up on high, and carried her body forth and buried it on Mount Sinai, where Moses brought the law from our Lord, from there where she died twenty days' journey and yet more, as pilgrims say who know it well.]

These miracles serve as an important predecessor to her healing ability. The milk mixed with her blood symbolizes her virginity and by extension, her intimacy with Christ that enables the miracles which are only furthered by the descension of angels to carry her body to Mount Sinai. The author heavily emphasizes her connection to the divine by drawing a parallel between her and Moses, one of the most well-known biblical figures. The narrator goes on to state that many miracles were performed through her body but that "an of the heste" [one of the highest] was:

thet ter rinneth áá mare eoile iliche rive, ant striketh a stream ut of thet stanene thruh thet ha in resteth. Yet, of the lute banes the floweth ut with the eoile floweth other eoile ut, hwider se me eaver bereth ham ant hwer se ha beoth ihalden, thet healeth alle uveles ant botneth men of each bale the rihte bileave habbeth.

[that there runs oil forever unceasingly abundant, and a stream runs out of that stone tomb that she rests in. Furthermore, from the little bones which flow out with the oil another oil flows out, wherever they are carried and wherever they are kept, which heals all sicknesses and cures people of every misery who have true belief.]

Meanwhile, Saint Margaret is given similar treatment as “comen dumbe ant deave to hire bodi as hit lei, and botneden alle” [the deaf and the dumb came to her body as it lay, and all were cured] and “tuhen alle to hire bodi the untrume weren ant hefden hare heale” [all who were infirm proceeded to her body and received healing]. The Bible is rife with stories of Christ healing the sick and restoring the dying to health.¹⁰⁰ In many cases, including the case of Christ cleansing a leper in Mark 1:40-45, an individual is healed through contact with Christ’s body as when Christ touched him and commanded him to ‘Be made clean’, the leper was completely healed. Christ also commands the apostles to go out into the world to perform miracles, including healing the sick.¹⁰¹ The ability of those imbued with God’s authority to perform healing miracles would therefore be commonplace to a medieval audience who doubtless believes in the validity of divine healing. By bestowing divine healing abilities on the saints’ bodies, the authors are playing into the precedent set by Christ and the apostles acting as agents of divine authority.

¹⁰⁰ Christ performed numerous healing miracles, including curing lepers (example: Mark 1:40-45), restoring sight to the blind (example: John 9: 1-12), and enabling the paralyzed to walk again (example: Matthew 9:2-8). All references to the scripture are from *The Bible*. English Standard Version, Crossway, 2016.

¹⁰¹ Matthew 10:1-8

Placing the saints in a position comparable to the most important and recognizable biblical figures would impress on the readers of the saints' lives the extent of the power instilled in the virgin martyrs. While Juliana's martyrdom does not explicitly mention the performance of healing rituals, her body is still depicted as under divine authority and protection, emphasizing the importance of her body, likely for the performance of future miracles, as is common in hagiographic tradition. When her corpse is under threat of capture, divine intervention strikes down those opposed to her followers:

The reeve sone se he wiste that ha wes awei ilead, leop for hihthe with lut men into a bat ant bigon to rowen swiftliche efter, for te reavin hit ham ant i the sea senchen. Ant arisen stormes se sterke ant se stronge, thet te bordes of this bat bursten ant tobreken, ant te sea sencte him on his thrituthe sum, ant therto yet fowre, ant draf ham adrenchet dead to the londe, ther ase wilde deor limmel toluken ham ant tolimesden eaver-euch lith from the lire. Ant te unseli sawlen sunken to Helle, to forswelten i sar ant i sorhe eaver.

[The reeve, as soon as he learned that she had been carried off, hastily leaped into a boat with a few men and began to row swiftly after, in order to seize the body from them and sink it into the sea. And there arose storms so stark and so strong that the boards of this boat burst and broke apart, and the sea sank him and thirty of his men, and still four more in addition, and drove them drowned dead to land, where wild beasts tore them apart limb from limb and ripped every single joint from the flesh. And the unholy souls sank to Hell, to perish miserably in pain and in sorrow forever.]

Like the other saints, Juliana's body represents more than simply a physical form. Her body symbolizes her relationship with God and the preservation of her body through divine intervention demonstrates the extent to which God has placed value on the bodies of saints. Even

though Juliana's body is not directly linked to the performing of healing miracles, lives were still saved by God for the sake of her body. Miracles surround the virgin saints and exemplify their profound connection to the divine through not only their own bodies being used posthumously to perform miracles, but through God working miracles for the benefit of their loyal followers.

The saints' connection to the divine, while clear in the demonstration of miracles, is perhaps most apparent in their ability to directly call on the Lord through the acts of prayers. Each hagiographic legend contains detailed and lengthy passages in which the saint vocalizes a prayer of supplication. Karen Winstead suggests the prayers are a way to "remind readers that the saints are ultimately frail women who rely on God for both their physical and their spiritual preservation."¹⁰² She furthers this idea by stating that the prayers redirect "the reader's attention from the spectacular event that has just taken place to the themes of God's power and the saint's faith."¹⁰³ The prayers, however, seem to serve a dual purpose-- both to remind readers that the saints are merely agents who rely on a higher power *and* to highlight the fact that these women are allowed such a close connection to the divine through which they can make personal pleas. Saint Juliana and Saint Margaret both pray for strength in their times of need. Juliana begs Him to "Halt me, Healent min, Jhesu Crist, Godes Sune, as Thu havest bigunnen, for nam ich strong of na thing buten of Thi strengthe" [Hold fast to me my Savior, Jesus Christ, God's Son, as you have begun to, for I am not strong from anything but from Your strength], explicitly calling attention to the fact that she is completely reliant on God for her strength and that she has the power to appeal directly to her Lord for divine strength. Margaret makes a similar plea as she states, "Hald me mi wit wel swa, ant mi wil, to The, thet hit ne forwurthe naut for wa thet me do me ne for wele nowther" [Protect well my wit, and my will also, to You, so that it may not

¹⁰² Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 56

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 25

become enfeebled in any way for woe that anyone does to me, nor for weal either.] In this prayer, Margaret specifically pleads for God to protect her wit and her will against being overpowered by any who oppose her. Not only does this imply that she does have a will to exert, though the extent to which *her* will is separable from divine will is questionable, but it also demonstrates the direct relationship between the prayer of saints and their ability to endure external afflictions, which will be further examined shortly. Saint Katherine makes a few prayers that differ slightly from the other two saints because she begs for knowledge, wisdom, and speech-giving abilities instead of physical endurance. As she “hef hire heorte up to the hehe Healant the iheret is in Heovene” [heaved her heart up to the high Savior who is praised in Heaven], Katherine “Bisohte Him help ant hap ant wisdom, ase wisliche as al the world is iweld thurh His wissunge” [asked Him for help and luck and wisdom, as wisely as all the world is ruled by His guidance.] In this case, the audience can see a very tangible, immediate consequence of this prayer as Katherine “wepnede hire with sothe bileave” [armed herself with true belief] and “com leapinde forth as al itent of the lei of the Hali Gast” [came leaping forth as if all inflamed with the flame of the Holy Ghost.] Her prayer enables her to be consumed by the Holy Ghost and empowered by this connection to fulfill her divine mission. She prays repeatedly and more explicitly for God to be with her and for him to put “swete sahen i mi muth to marhen” [sweet words in my mouth tomorrow] so that she may overcome those who attempt to oppose her arguments. Katherine’s ability to articulate theologically sound arguments in the face of learned pagan scholars and actually confound the supposed ‘wise men’ is due in part to her education and learnings of scriptures previously mentioned, but even more evidently, her success is a result of God’s provision. The virgin martyrs are not only shown to possess the ability to call on the Lord whenever they desire, but their legends also clearly depict that God grants them what

they ask and responds to their prayers almost immediately. Their divine connection results in their ability to persevere through mental, emotional, and physical stressors.

In addition to the overt strength and outward displays of power these women demonstrate, their status as powerful agents of the divine can also be boiled down to a general fortitude that enables them to exist and, in fact, thrive in a world of incredible stress. We have already seen the fact that these women attribute their success to their intimacy with the divine. How else would anyone be able recognize the fact that they are “bisteppe ant bistonden ase lomb with wedde wulves, ant ase the fuhel the is ivon in thes fuheleres grune, ase fisc ahon on hoke, ase ra inumen i Nette” [beset and surrounded as a lamb among mad wolves, and like the bird that is caught in the fowler’s trap, like a fish hung on a hook, like a roe taken in a net] and still remain steadfast in their conviction, as does Saint Margaret when she is confronted with this feeling? All worldly hope of success is lost and it is because of their devotion to the divine that they are able to face impossible circumstances and endure the strain of their opposition. Margaret, in her darkest moment, alone and facing a demon, emerges from the belly of the beast “allunge unmerret, withuten eaver-euch wem” [entirely unharmed, without any spot.] Juliana and Katherine demonstrate similar testaments to their fortitude or ability to withstand the impossible as Juliana “Com baldeliche forth bivore the reve” [came boldly forth before the reeve] without regard for her safety and Katherine endured life in prison, being cared for by the Lord:

Crist ne foryet nawt that he ne nom yeme to hire that me heold yet (as the keiser het) bute mete ant mel i the cwarterne, ah with fode of Heovene thurh His ahne engel i culvrene iliche, fedde hire al the tweolf dahes as He dude Daniel thurh Abacuc the prophete i the liunes leohe ther he in lutede. Ure Lauerd Himseolf com with engles ant with monie meidnes with alle, with swuch dream ant drihtfere as Drihtin deh to cumene.

[Christ did not at all forget to take care of her who was still held (as the emperor commanded) without food and meal in the prison, but, with food of Heaven through His own angel in the likeness of a dove, fed her the whole twelve days as He did Daniel through Habakkuk the prophet in the lion's lair in which he lay imprisoned. Our Lord Himself came with angels and with many maidens as well, with such angelic singing and a procession as it befits the Lord to come.]

In each case, the virgin martyrs are faced with an opportunity in which they can easily shrink back and choose self-preservation above continuing in service of the Lord. All logic points to kowtowing to the worldly authority which oppresses them. In spite of this, in every instance, the women never abandon their faith in the face of hopelessness, despair, and torment. The power these women gain as agents of the divine is not simply the ability to wield power (via outsmarting or overpowering an opponent) throughout the world in the name of the Lord, but they also demonstrate the power of faith in enabling someone to persevere through some of the worst treatment humanity has to offer.

Like the hagiographic stories, the romances hinge on the ability of their female characters to perform deeds well outside the realm of possibility for the average mortal woman. The romances focus on how magic imbues the fairy women with the ability to serve as benefactors, satisfy human laws, and possess foreknowledge that otherwise would be impossible to attain. The plots of *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* are contingent upon their fairy mistresses interceding where the human world fails the knights. This is first seen in the ways in which they adopt the role of benefactor for their knights when their lords fail to uphold this responsibility. In *Lanval*, the narrator expresses the extent to which the King fails in this respect stating,

Women and land

He shared out with generous hand
 To all but one who'd served. Lanval
 He forgot¹⁰⁴

The relationship between king and knight is meant to be reciprocal: loyalty and fealty in exchange for recognition and material goods. The author of *Sir Launfal* seems to attempt to shift the blame from the King as they make it the Queen's intentional refusal to bestow the knight with gifts that spurred his exit from the court, though it must be acknowledged that the King is still at fault because regardless of his wife's actions, he should still actively maintain his relationships with his knights:

The Quene yaf yftes for the nones,
 Gold and selver and precyous stonys
 Her curtasye to kythe.
 Everych knyght sche gaf broche other ryng,
 But Syr Launfal sche yaf nothyng -
 That grevede hym many a sythe.¹⁰⁵

[The Queen distributed gifts for the occasion - gold, silver and precious stones - in order to display her courtesy. To each knight she gave either a brooch or ring, but to Sir Launfal she gave nothing, and that grieved him deeply.]

In each instance, it is clear that the knights Lanval and Launfal are being exempted from a cultural norm meant to bind them to their lords and the court in general. In the absence of a worthy lord to whom they can pledge loyalty, they are each approached by their fairy lover whose largess more than makes up for the failures of the King and the court. As a manifestation

¹⁰⁴ *Lanval*, ll. 17-20

¹⁰⁵ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 67-72

of wish fulfilment, the fairy mistresses assume the role of benefactor and ‘lord’ as they provide the knights with anything they could wish for and more, all in exchange for loyalty and secrecy.

Lanval’s lover and Dame Tryamour each provide the care, attention, and material goods that the knights long for. In doing so the fairy mistress “both construct and constitute total gift systems that operate independently from any exchange structures existing within the human worlds of their texts.”¹⁰⁶ Because the fairy mistresses include not only material wealth but also their bodies and the attention and loyalty that would normally be supplied by a lord, the women prove that they are not simply a “rich patroness”¹⁰⁷, a title to which Derek Pearsall reduces Dame Tryamour, but they are themselves inextricably bound up in the exchange in a way that far surpasses the engagement of a typical patroness. As James Wade indicates, the fairy women “create unique systems where the subject and the object of the transaction are one in the same” and despite the fact that “supernatural gifts can never be adequately reciprocated by someone from the human world” these texts find a way around this complication by the creation of the “taboo” which the male knight must abide by in order to remain in this relationship.¹⁰⁸ *Lanval* describes the fairy mistress’ largess saying:

Afterwards, she gives a present:
 Anything he may ever want
 He'll get, as far as his needs extend;
 Generously he may give and spend--
 She will find the wherewithal.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Wade, James. *Fairies in Medieval Romance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 114

¹⁰⁷ Pearsall, Derek. “Development of Middle English Romances.” *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*. D.S. Brewer. 1988. p. 32

¹⁰⁸ Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, pp. 114-115

¹⁰⁹ *Lanval*, ll. 135-139

Not only does she provide him with seemingly unlimited funds, so that he may never be in need again, but she enables him to be generous to others. While *Lanval* only specifically mentions that the knight's mistress gave him "his own horse/ properly saddled, equipped with bridle", *Sir Launfal* is vastly more descriptive in both what the knight receives and what he is able to give away to others. The principle of largess is perhaps more evident in *Sir Launfal* as Dame Tryamour states that in exchange for being his only lover, and a secret from the world, she will give him both goods and a horse and servant:

Ryche I wyll make the
 I wyll the yeve an alner
 Ymad of sylk and of gold cler,
 Wyth fayre yimages thre.
 As oft thou putttest the hond therinne,
 A mark of gold thou schalt wynne
 In wat place that thou be.
 "Also," sche seyde, "Syr Launfal,
 I yeve the Blaunchard, my stede lel,
 And Gyfre, my owen knave.
 And of my armes oo pensel
 Wyth thre ermyns ypeynted well,
 Also thou schalt have."¹¹⁰

[I will make you rich. I will give you a purse of silk and clear gold, with three fair images upon it; as often as you put your hand into it, wherever you are, you will find therein a

¹¹⁰ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 318-327

gold coin. Also, I give you my loyal steed, Blaunchard, and Gifre, my personal servant, and you shall have a small banner bearing my arms of three emblazoned ermines.]

Sir Launfal's description enables readers to see that this is not a simple patronage or donation of money; Dame Tryamour establishes Sir Launfal within a hierarchy as she allows him to use her 'pencil'. A pencil can refer to both "a lady's token displayed by a knight" and "a small pennon... often used in identify a lord and his men-at-arms"¹¹¹. In this case, the term can be read in both senses of its meaning as Dame Tryamour both claims her status as his lover and assumes the hierarchical role of Sir Launfal's lord. Additionally, *Sir Launfal* goes on to emphasize the extent to which the knight is able to demonstrate his own largesse:

Launfal helde ryche festes.
 Fyfty fedde povere gestes,
 That yn myschef wer.
 Fyfty boughte stronge stedes;
 Fyfty yaf ryche wedes
 To knyghtes and squyere.
 Fyfty rewardede relygyons;
 Fyfty delyverede povere prysouns,
 And made ham quyt and schere;
 Fyfty clodede gestours.
 To many men he dede honours
 In countreys fer and nere.¹¹²

¹¹¹ "Pencil." *Middle English Compendium*, University of Michigan, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED32807/track?counter=2&search_id=5610180.

¹¹² *Sir Launfal*, ll. 421-432

[Launfal held great feasts, fed fifty poor guests who were in misfortune, bought fifty strong steeds, gave fifty rich garments to knights and squires, rewarded fifty men of religion, liberated fifty poor prisoners and made them free of legal claims, clothed fifty minstrels, and did honor to many men, in countries far and near.]

The reiteration of the knight's generosity and the focus on the repeating numbers by the author make it clear that the author wants to draw attention to just how outrageous and abnormal this kind of giving would be for someone of Sir Launfal's status. While it may seem strange that the author of *Sir Launfal* chose to adapt *Lanval* in this way, it may have been an attempt to emphasize the exceptionality of Dame Tryamour's influence. Whether to ensure readers recognize the infeasibility of the extent of Dame Tryamour's power and authority over Launfal or to stress the fairy's benevolence and good will in the face of growing tensions around the supernatural, by drawing focus on the exorbitant generosity of the fairy woman, the author definitively establishes Dame Tryamour as a figure capable of influencing the mortal world to an extent unimaginable among mortals. *Lanval*'s mysterious ambiguity surrounding the fairy mistress' largess and *Sir Launfal*'s blatant focus on the extraordinary nature of the largess ultimately both result in the reader viewing the fairy mistresses as possessing a power and authority to control the mortal world that is unattainable for mortals.

Lanval and *Sir Launfal* take the notion that the fairy mistresses are filling in for a shortcoming in the mortal world a step further when the fairy mistresses are able to satisfy the requirements of the law which is being used against the knights. The knights are each being held accountable for their boast about the superiority of their lover's beauty and the court, in its willingness to condemn the knight without proof, demonstrates that it does not support belief in the word of the knights alone. After the knights have each fostered a relationship with the court

and the King, for their word to hold no weight would be a catastrophic undermining of the chivalric code which binds the knights and their lords. In these moments, the fairy mistresses come to the rescue and are shown to be capable of demonstrating public authority in the form of legal assistance, a capacity not normally attributed to women in the Middle Ages. Judith Bennett emphasizes the rarity of women engaging in public legal proceedings stating, “The public authority of women was severely restricted by their inability to form political associations with others through tithings, pledging, or other forms of legal assistance.”¹¹³ *Lanval* shows that the knight must prove himself truthful by allowing the court to view his lover with the statement:

And, if he can prove the truth,
 And his lady appears before us
 So that it is clearly seen
 It was no lie that upset the Queen¹¹⁴

While this may seem like it merely reduces the fairy lover to an object, *Lanval*'s lover addresses the court upon arrival and states “If the law's satisfied by what you see / may your barons set him free”¹¹⁵ and she is later described as *Lanval*'s “perfect defense.”¹¹⁶ In this way, *Lanval*'s lover acknowledges that she has the power to fulfil the boast *Lanval* made and the authority to do so in the public setting. In *Sir Launfal*, Dame Tryamour similarly addresses the King directly saying, “Syr, hydyr I com for swych a thyng:/ To skere Launfal the knyght;”¹¹⁷ [Sir, I have come to clear Sir Launfal] and that the King must “good kepe thou nyme!”¹¹⁸ [heed my words well].

The forceful language with which she greets the King within his own court makes this exchange

¹¹³ Bennett, “Public Power and Authority in Medieval English Countryside.” p. 26

¹¹⁴ *Lanval*, ll. 452-455

¹¹⁵ *Lanval*, ll. 626-627

¹¹⁶ *Lanval*, l. 631

¹¹⁷ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 992-993

¹¹⁸ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 997

even more remarkable, showing that not only is Dame Tryamour capable of interfering in the law but she can openly command the King to pay attention to her. The fairy lover's importance is certainly highlighted in *Sir Launfal* as the knight says of his lover, "Sche myghte me of my balys bete"¹¹⁹ [She has the power to remedy my misfortune]. The knight essentially asserts that by inserting herself into the court and fulfilling her knight's boast, thus satisfying the law, the fairy woman has the authority to overcome all of the worldly tribulations the knight faces and to make everything better. The authors of both *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* are sure to emphasize this moment as a pivotal part of the story in which the reader realizes just how far the fairies are able to command authority over the mortal world. The authors allow the fairy women to assume a social position (i.e. enabling them to participate in public legal settings), in order to potentially demonstrate the capacity for women to hold public authority. This is, of course, challenged when the reader understands that the authority that these women have is rooted in their connection to the otherworld.

In stories like *Sir Launfal* and *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, the fairy mistresses' connection to the otherworld also manifests in their prescience. Perhaps more than anything else, the fairy mistresses' ability to know the future, and to foretell events, conveys the extent to which they hold complete authority over the mortal realm. In *Sir Launfal*, Dame Tryamour makes what seems like a passing comment to her lover about his upcoming tournament, "Dreed the nothyng, Syr gentyll knyght,/ Thou schalt hym sle that day!"¹²⁰ [Fear nothing, gentle sir knight! For you will slay him when you together meet.] As the knight's fight progresses and he is ultimately only successful because of Gifre's intervention, the audience is struck with the thought that perhaps Dame Tryamour was making more than a passing comment-- she was stating a certain fact. The

¹¹⁹ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 971

¹²⁰ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 551-552

reader already knows that Dame Tryamour gave the knight his servant, Gifre, perhaps because she knew her lover would need a servant's help to win his challenge. It seems highly unlikely that Dame Tryamour was doing nothing more than acting as a lover, ignorantly encouraging her knight; rather, it seems like the fairy had knowledge of how events would unfold, and was actually stating what she *knew* to be true. Thomas' lover demonstrates an even wider scope of foreknowledge, as she expounds at length about the future of his country. The narrator introduces her precognitions when the fairy lover states: "'Thomas, of a Batelle j sall þe telle,'"¹²¹ [Thomas, I shall tell you of a battle] but soon becomes more specific with her prophecies, seen in an exchange between her and her lover:

'Nowe, lufly lady, gente and hende,
 Telle me,if it thi willis bee,
 Of thyes Batells, how þay schall ende,
 And whate schalle worthe of this northe countre?'

'This worlde, Thomas, sothely to telle,
 Es noghte bot wandrethe &woghe!¹²²

[‘Now, lovely lady, gentle and noble, tell me, if it is your will, of this battle, how shall it end, and what shall become of this Northern Country?’ ‘This world, Thomas, truthfully told, will be nothing but misery and woe.’]

The scope of Thomas' mistress' foreknowledge far outstrips anything the other two fairies demonstrates. In fact, Thomas' lover is perhaps most notable for her knowledge and her willingness to impart that knowledge. Throughout the story, Thomas' lover repeatedly demonstrates her knowledge of the unknown as she enlightens her lover about the paths to other

¹²¹ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll. 349

¹²² *Tomas Off Ersseldoune*, ll. 489-494

realms. Her knowledge is distinct from that which is attainable within the natural mortal world and her knowledge of the future of her lover's country ultimately establishes the fact that she is drawing this knowledge from her connection to the otherworld. Unlike *Sir Launfal* which merely tangentially suggests the improbability of Dame Tryamour's words being a coincidence, *Thomas off Ersseldoune* forces readers to face the fact that the fairy mistress has the ability 'sothely to telle' the future of this world. The author does not allow any room for the reader to believe this kind of knowledge is attainable in the typical discursive structure in which the readers are restricted. The authors of both texts also never address specifically how the fairies possess their knowledge. The audiences, both contemporary and modern, do not know whether it is an ability gained simply by operating as an external figure looking in on the world, or whether more complex magic is required. The audience only knows one thing: the fairies possess foreknowledge through supernatural means.

Instead of using a female character that exists within the same social structure as the knights, which would directly challenge the patriarchal hierarchy, the authors chose to introduce an external figure, which creates a space in which the audience does not have to consider this a challenge to their society. Much like the virgin martyrs, who gain their power from the divine, the fairy mistresses are symbols of inconceivable access to power while also demonstrating that female authority is the exception, not the rule. By examining these instances where the female characters in both genres exhibit extraordinary access to power and public authority, we can see the tendency for the authors to attempt to justify or excuse their decision to depict their female characters in this way. In the next chapter, we will look deeper into the effects the emphasis on the external influences has within the text, as well as the implications of this emphasis on our understanding of magic and divine forces themselves.

Chapter 3: Magic and Religion: To Blend or Not to Blend

The influence and importance of religion and magic are infused into almost every line of these selected texts. It is evident from our discussion of the fairy mistresses and virgin martyrs that magical and divine external forces shape the role the female characters play in their narratives and enable them to occupy an elevated space not typically inhabited by women. While the actions and identities of the fairy mistresses and virgin martyrs point toward the tendency for medieval authors to qualify the power and authority they allow their female characters by relying on outside forces, we must also acknowledge how religion and magic exist in the texts outside of the direct engagement with the female characters. Both the hagiographic and romance texts are saturated with religious and magical elements; this chapter will focus on religion and magic more generally as referenced in the texts and discuss what this means for a contemporary medieval audience's understanding of magic and religion and their relationship to the roles and expectations placed on women (as well as how this is manifested in the female characters present within the text). This chapter will demonstrate that these medieval texts, in their descriptions of magic and religion conflate the two forces while the authors simultaneously attempt to distinguish between them, creating an ambiguous space in which readers can question the bounds of each and witness the instability of discursive structures.

Emphasizing the Other

The female characters being examined do not constitute the entirety of the magical or divine elements in their respective stories; rather, they are a conduit through which the external forces which are emphasized throughout the entire story are able to be directly manifested. The prominence of the other and the otherworld sets the stage for the female characters to engage with the external forces and should be acknowledged in their own rite. Whether it be through the

repeated references to God and the promise of Heaven or the exposure of a world outside the one in which the narrative takes place, the authors actively create a space for their female characters to levy their increased power or authority. The hagiographic and romance texts both accomplish this creation of a manipulable space through similar means: underscoring the external forces' authority and calling attention to the realm of the 'other'.

By underscoring the authority of the divine or magical forces in each text, the stories challenge the typical workings of the mortal world. The Katherine Group texts each call special attention to the extent of God's authority to control and alter the world and lives of humans. *Seinte Katherine* plainly states that "Ah ther nis buten an Godd thur hwam witerliche ha alle weren iwrahte ant of nawiht, ant i this weorlde iset us forto frovrin ant to fremien" [But there is nothing except one God, through whom certainly they all were wrought and from nothing, and set in this world to comfort and to help us.] This text hones in on the belief that all things, both in the mortal realm and beyond, originate from God and without His authority, all things would cease to be. Continuing from this position of God's omnipotence, the narrator allows for a more specific examination of the extent of God's authority as they call attention to the various miracles:

Ah thes, thurh thet He wes soth Godd, in His cunde icuplet with ure, arerde the deade, botnede blinde, the dumbe, ant te deave, healde halte and hoverede, ant each unheale, ant draf of the wedde awariede wihtes, ant as alweldende wrahte her on worlde al thet He walde.

[But this one, because he was true God, in His nature coupled with ours, raised the dead, healed the blind, the dumb, and the deaf, cured the cripples and the humpbacked, and

every disease, and drove from the mad accursed demons, and as the all-powerful He worked here in the world all that He wished.]

The narrator of the legend of Saint Katherine leaves very little room for interpretation as they attribute unlimited power to do ‘al they He walde’ in the mortal world as well as complete command over that power. Meanwhile, Saint Juliana’s legend reiterates the notion that God alone has utter control over all of existence when it describes God as “‘áá liviende God, the lufsume Lauerd thet schupte alle scheaftes ant wealdeth ant wisseth, efter thet His wil is, al thet ischeapen is” [the ever living God, the lovely Lord who created all creatures, and rules and directs, according to His will, all that is created.] Perhaps most demonstrable of divine influence is Saint Margaret’s legend as it expounds upon God’s authority, drawing from doctrinal knowledge, personal reflection, and even romance imagery to impress upon the reader the extent of divine engagement with the mortal world as it states:

Ah The Ich thonki throf, the kingene King art, echeliche icrunet, sorhfule ant sari ant sunfule toturn, wondrinde ant wrecches ant wonlese wisent, castel of strengthe ayein the stronge unwiht, meidenes murhthe ant martyrs crune, mel-seotel softest ant guldene yerde, alre gold smeatest ant glistinde gimstan, of alle seheliche thing ant unseheliche ba swotest ant swetest, alre schefte Schuppent, thrumnesse threovald ant anvald the-hwethere, thrile i threo hades ant an in an hehschipe, heh hali Godd, each godes ful, beo Thu eaver ant áá iheret ant iheiet bute linnunge.

[But I thank You for that, who are King of kings, crowned eternally, a refuge for the sorrowful and the sorry and the sinful, a guide for the wandering and the wretched and the hopeless, a castle of strength against the powerful demon, maidens’ mirth and martyrs’ crown, softest seat at the feast and golden scepter, purest of all gold and

glistening gemstone, of all things both seen and unseen the sweetest and most fragrant, the Creator of all creatures, threefold Trinity and nevertheless one, threefold in three persons and one on high high holy God, full of every goodness, may You forever and ever be praised and worshiped without end]

In each saints' life, the author establishes divine authority outside of the direct manifestations we can see in the saints' agency on God's behalf. By doing this, the authors ensure that the audience understands that God's authority exists outside of the exploits of the virgin martyrs. As a natural progression from that thought, it becomes clear that the extraordinary feats of the saints are only conceivable because of divine authority. God is seen as the omnipotent head of a power hierarchy that dominates and overwhelms any other attempt at power. While the stories do have a set human societal framework, we must remember that in medieval England, it would be expected that God wields the greatest authority over that hierarchy and is capable of both direct and indirect intervention to carry out His will. Therefore, despite God existing within (and enabling) the patriarchal discursive structure, because of his omnipotence, he is seemingly able to create female agents with power within that structure without any worthy opposition. While the texts each make an effort to mention this directly, as we have seen in the previous chapters, even without the authors' insertions openly mitigating the power of the saints, the abstract praise of divine authority produces much the same effect.

The romance texts employ the opposite strategy in order to establish the authority of Fae magic in the mortal world; rather than attempt to define its authority and elaborate upon its nature, the authors allow it to remain a mystery. As Marcel Mauss indicates "isolation and secrecy" are key elements of magical practitioners and magical rites.¹²³ It is common, if not

¹²³ Mauss, Marcel. *A General Theory of Magic*. Translated by Robert Brain, Routledge & Kagan Paul, 1972, p. 23

essential, for “both the actor and the act [to be] shrouded in mystery.”¹²⁴ Because of this, much of the nuance of fairy magic is left unknown to the audience of the text. Even most of the actual practice of magic occurs outside of the scope of the narratives, perhaps the most notable exception being the moment in which Dame Tryamour blinded the Queen with her magical breath.¹²⁵ The practice of magic is again implied as Lanval’s lover states she will always be able to find him while still remaining hidden from everyone else: “No man but you will see me when / I’m with you, or hear my words then.”¹²⁶ The audience never sees the lover perform this magic directly and her statement echoes the Christian idea that God is omnipresent; it is precisely this ambiguity that surrounds the fairy magic that allows readers to recognize the authority possessed by those who wield it. Unlike divine authority, which has a precedent in medieval thought as being all-encompassing and unparalleled, fairy magic is viewed as such an authority precisely because bounds have not been placed on it. If the author makes no attempt to stipulate limits of fairy magic and only emphasizes the expansive possibilities enabled through its utilization, the reader is forced to assume the plausibility of fairy magic acting as a similarly unrestricted resource.

Despite differences in how the authors chose to refer to the abstract existence of either God or magic, both genres of text make repeated references to a physical ‘other’ world that acts as a point of reference for the authority of the external source of power. In the case of the virgin martyr saints’ legends, references to Heaven are repeated throughout the narrative in order to serve as an incentive or justification for their actions. In her moment of need, Saint Katherine can be seen “biheolt efter help up toward Heovene” [looking up toward Heaven for help] because it is

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 23

¹²⁵ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 1006-1008.

¹²⁶ *Lanval*, ll. 169-170

recognized that this is the location from which all divine authority stems. Meanwhile, Saint Margaret remarks that she will “mede habben in Heovene” [have (her) reward in heaven] even as she, like Katherine, “ahef hire heorte heh up towart heovene” [heaved her heart up high toward Heaven]. Margaret simultaneously expresses a longing for reward in heaven and acknowledges the distinct separation of divine power from worldly existence. Saint Juliana even goes so far as to request the “mihte of Heovene” [might of heaven] specifically, making synonymous the authority of God and the existence of an otherworldly plane from which unlimited power could flow. In much the same way, the world of the Fairies is repeatedly referenced in order to highlight the intrusion of an otherworld upon the mortal realm. Just as God’s authority is associated with Heaven, the fairy mistresses’ authority is situated in their Fairy realm. The most potent references to the Fairy world in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* occur when the fairy mistresses retrieve their lover at the end of the story and take them into the otherworld. In *Lanval*, the narrator states,

With her he's gone to Avalon--
 Or so say the poets in Breton--
 To the fair island far away
 She ravished that noble youth;¹²⁷

The narrator is rather ambiguous in describing the Fairyland or positioning it in relation to the mortal world, opting instead to remain mysterious. While they do name the Fairy Realm, Avalon, the author acknowledges that this is merely a moniker ascribed by mortals to the otherworld. The world of Dame Tryamour is similarly described in vague terms:

Thus Launfal, wythouten fable,

¹²⁷ *Lanval*, ll. 644-647

That noble knyght of the Rounde Table,
 Was take ynto Fayrye;
 Seththe saw hym yn thys lond noman,
 Ne no more of hym telle y ne can,
 For sothe, wythoute lye.¹²⁸

[Thus Launfal, truly, that noble knight of the Round Table, was taken into the land of the fairies. No one has seen him since, and I, ...can relate no more...truly I cannot.]

Sir Launfal goes on to make the distinction between Fairyland and the mortal realm even more clear as he depicts Launfal making a journey between the two lands once a year. Throughout the text, Sir Launfal seems to exist in connection with both the mortal world and the fairy world but in the act of needing to travel from one to the other, the reader can acknowledge the rift between the two worlds, perhaps more clearly than the overly ambiguous reference in *Lanval*. The most poignant depiction of the fairy world, however, is seen in *Tomas off Ersseldoune*. The male lover travels to and from the otherworld in the span of the narrative and can see and relate the distinctions between the two. Thomas must trek through a rugged wilderness, nearly starving, in order to make it to the fairy realm through a path obviously not meant for mortals to travel as he shows himself to be dependent on the fairy woman for sustenance in order to make it through alive.¹²⁹ The most crucial moment in the depiction of the supernatural occurs when the fairy mistress points out the diverging paths to heaven, paradise, purgatory, and hell, followed by pointing out “zone faire castelle” [the fair castle] in the distance to signify the fairy land.¹³⁰ The author’s image of diverging pathways makes abundantly clear the intentionally separate spaces

¹²⁸ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 1033-1038

¹²⁹ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll.170-178

¹³⁰ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll. 201-218

that these locations should occupy in the reader's mind; interestingly, however, of the five separate supernatural realms, each coexists with the others and none are given superseding preference. The only exception to this is the fact that the fairy realm is the only one depicted as an immediately accessible location. The fairy mistress points out the exact castle and court to which they can travel and thus impresses upon the reader the notion of the immediacy of the fairy realm's influence. Perhaps this is meant to emphasize the extent to which the fairy realm can encroach upon the mortal realm or perhaps its proximity explains why the fairy mistress is able to wield such authority in a realm that is not her own. Regardless of the intent, the authors of all of these texts intentionally locate the authority of their female characters in another specified, external location. Locating the authority which enables all the action of the martyrs and fairy mistresses in another realm (Heaven or Fairy land) impresses upon the reader the unprecedented nature of the women's agency. The audience is able to divorce the women's power and authority in the stories from their own expectations of women's agency in medieval society because they have a discernible alternate dimension to which they can ascribe any dissonance with their own society.

Blurring the Lines between Religion and Magic

Despite attempts on behalf of the authors to distinguish religion and magic within their texts by making explicit references to their differences throughout, the function of magic and religion within the texts and the internal references to both creates the sense that they may not be mutually exclusive. From a more general anthropological perspective, religion and magic are often studied as part of the same domain because their influence on societies can have the same

effect.¹³¹ Corinne Saunders defines the medieval supernatural as a “complex intersection of ideas” constituted of “providence and divine intervention, angels and demons, the otherworld and the marvellous which are complemented by an acute sense of the power of natural forces in the cosmos that may be probed and harnessed.”¹³² It is important to note that this understanding of the supernatural, as it would be accepted by a medieval audience, can feasibly encompass both divine and magical forces. Saunders indicates that a belief in magic was “endorsed by the powerful belief in Christian supernatural.”¹³³ While fairies are often considered as separate from demonic or angelic beings, this distinction would not have been as discernible to an everyday medieval audience and there was considerable speculation about the fairies’ relationship to infernal influence. Considering the ambiguity in the nature of fairy magic, it is even more readily understandable how audiences may, in fact, amalgamate the otherworldly forces at play in these texts to simply identify that there is an external force influencing the mortal world, with less importance placed on the exact nature of the external force.

For my study of medieval texts, the importance in acknowledging the blending of magic and religion lies in the way these forces influence the text and consequently the audience’s understanding of the creation of agency for female characters. Saunders suggests that the romance genre’s “imaginary otherworlds” are “seductive in their otherness and exoticism, and that [they] promise what reality cannot.”¹³⁴ James Wade narrows this argument somewhat when he supposes that romance authors recognize the “creative potential” of establishing an

¹³¹ In his study *Magic, Science, and Religion*, Malinowski defines the two domains of research as “the Sacred and the Profane; in other words, the domain of Magic and Religion and that of Science.” p. 17. The clear distinction, then, separates science from magic and religion while implying an inherent connection between magic and religion.

¹³² Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p.59

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 84

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 2

otherworld and that they “used fairies to explore issues and achieve narrative effects that could not be accomplished in any other way.”¹³⁵ We have already seen throughout the course of this study that the romance texts are able to ascribe authority to their fairy women while the saints are merely allowed considerable power; however, both instances support the notion that not only magical otherworlds, but religious ones as well, have the ability to enable what the reality of medieval society cannot. If Saunders and Wade are strict in their insular definitions which privilege romance texts, then the overlap in effect that religious, hagiographical texts present is ignored. Both genres explore the appearance and consequences of enabling women to have power beyond what is possible in reality. While romances enable authority in a way that is not possible in a hierarchy dominated by God, the discursive structures of medieval society are still manipulated in similar ways.

The collision of religious and magical tones in the hagiographic legends is striking, and yet the question remains whether the audience would have been impacted by this overlap. Catherine Rider states that though “both magic and miracles were wondrous events which could not be explained” and “throughout the Middle Ages stories about saints played on this” ultimately the audience would not have been “challenged” because they would recognize the fact that the saints were not, in fact, doing magic.¹³⁶ If this is the case, then it is interesting to consider why the authors would allow their religious acts to share similarities with magic. Perhaps it is precisely the fact that their audience would be able to distinguish between the two that permitted the authors to take creative license within their texts. Rider suggests the authors of the saints’ lives used the overlap between the two forces to reinforce a “dramatic effect”¹³⁷ in

¹³⁵ Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p.1

¹³⁶ Rider, Catherine. *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*. Reaktion Books, 2012, p. 15.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 15

their texts, essentially just amplifying the otherness of the actions. We can see this in the texts as Saint Katherine and Saint Juliana are both accused of witchcraft:

Saint Katherine: Thah thu beo schuldi — the ane — of ham alle clane, thah thu with thi wicchecreft habbe imaket se monie to eornen towart hare death as ha weren wode

[Though you are responsible — you alone — for every single one of them, though you with your witchcraft have made so many run towards their deaths as if they were mad]

Saint Juliana: Juliene, sei me ant beo soth cnawes: hwer were the itaht theose

wicchecreftes [Juliana, tell me and be truthful: where were you taught those witchcrafts]

Not only does the extraordinary nature of their actions that we have previously examined echo the magical abilities found in romances, but the pagan characters in the stories directly associate the saints with witchcraft and magic. This has two main effects: the audience is forced to acknowledge how these two external forces could, in fact, be perceived as related and they are presented with a value judgement on those who derive their power from religious or magical means. By aligning the witchcraft with the pagan villains' perception in the text, the authors decidedly show preference for divine influence. Despite the fact that the religious and magical forces *can* be seen as analogous, these saints' lives question whether they *should* be viewed in a similar manner. Perhaps by conceding slightly that the saints' miracles do share a similarity with magic and then ultimately reinforcing the superiority of divine influence, the texts emphasize the need to limit women's agency to merely possessing an enabling power under God and not the absolute authority that magic grants.

While the saints' lives show the potential melding of magic and religion, though ultimately remaining vigilantly in preference for divine influence, the romance texts seem more interested in drawing on religious themes and language to lend credence to their narrative. The

romances accomplish this by making explicit reference to religious settings and using language which equates the fairy mistresses with a religious figure. *Sir Launfal* employs a nominally religious setting. The narrative is said to coincide with both Pentecost in “Swych tyme as the Holy Gost / Among mankend gan lyght,¹³⁸[the time when the Holy Ghost descends upon humanity] and the “day of the Trinite”¹³⁹ [The feast of Trinity]. These references to Christian celebrations are meant to emphasize the failings of the romance court as even while the Holy Spirit is supposed to be working among the people, Launfal is at his lowest point and as the court celebrates a Christian feast day, Launfal suffers in poverty. As we have seen throughout the narratives, the primary function of the fairy mistresses is to offer their lovers what society has failed to fulfill. By pointing out the Christian setting of the narrative and still highlighting the fairy mistresses’ role in this way, the authors allow both magical and divine forces to exist in the same space and have the ability, if not the willingness, to accomplish the same goal. In other words, while the Christian society, imbued with the Holy Spirit’s influence, could have satisfied the Launfal, it did not; in contrast, the magic represented by the fairy mistresses had the same ability *and* a readiness to assist Launfal.

In addition to *Sir Launfal*’s Christian setting, all three romances contain language which binds the magical authority of the fairy mistresses to that of God. Lanval’s lover seems to establish herself as a Christ figure as she states, “I left my lands to come where you are;/ to find you I have come so far.”¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Lanval seems to validate this view as he states “All others for you I abandon. / From you I never want to part: / That hope is strongest in my heart.”¹⁴¹ The significance of an authoritative figure appearing from an external, mysterious

¹³⁸ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 134-135

¹³⁹ *Sir Launfal*, l.181

¹⁴⁰ *Lanval*, ll. 111-112

¹⁴¹ *Lanval*, ll. 128-130

location in order to serve and redeem a human and to whom the mortal devotes himself and rests his hope would not be lost on a medieval audience to whom Christ's Passion was a part of their cultural consciousness. *Sir Launfal* uses the same devotional language as *Lanval* in order to liken

Dame Tryamour to God:

Alas!" he seyde, "my creature,

How schall I from the endure,

Swetyng Tryamour?

All my joye I have forelore,

And the - that me ys worst fore¹⁴²

[Launfal cried, "Alas, my darling! How can I live apart from you, dearest Tryamour? All my joy I have lost and --worst of all-- you, my beloved lady!"]

The knight's unwavering allegiance to Dame Tryamour, his assertion that all of his joy comes from his connection to his mistress, and the notion that separation from the fairy mistress would leave him irrevocably lost, all lend to the idea that--to Launfal at least-- the mistress occupies the same space and role that God would typically inhabit. Thomas' lover, unlike the previous two fairy mistresses, is actually mistaken for the Blessed Virgin Mary and she has to correct Thomas' assumption:

'Thomas! late swylke wordes bee;

Qwene of heuene ne am j noghte,

ffor j tuke neuer so heghe degre.

Bote j ame of ane oþer countree,¹⁴³

¹⁴² *Sir Launfal*, ll. 745-748

¹⁴³ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll 90-93.

[Thomas! Let such words be; I am not the Queen of heaven, for I would never take so high a degree. But I am from another country.]

The Virgin Mary is undoubtedly the most important woman in medieval religious literature (if not all literature), and the author's conscious forging of this mental association between the pagan and religious figure, however briefly, lends to the idea that the romance texts use religious connections in order to underscore the otherness as well as the capabilities of the fairies. The romance texts are more willing than the saints' lives to allow conspicuous correlations between magical and religious expressions; it is possible that the notion of divine influence or religious presence would be more widely accepted by audiences and authors intentionally enable this parallel. The audience may be aware that religion and magic are two very distinct forces, but the association between the two within the text would likely be enough for the audience to perceive them as having comparable capacities for influence.

Despite this conscious coupling of magic and religious forces in respect to female characterization, the romance authors still acknowledge the superiority of divine authority, ultimately leading to the view that despite the overlap in magical and religious power and the seemingly greater authority ascribed to female characters who derive their power solely from magical means, audiences should esteem divine influence in higher regards. Both *Sir Launfal* and *Tomas off Ersseldoune* contain authorial insertions which favor the authority of religion.

Thomas Chester states:

Thomas Chestre made thys tale
 Of the noble knyght Syr Launfale,
 Good of chyvalrye.
 Jhesus, that ys hevene kyng,

Yeve us alle Hys blessyng,
 And Hys modyr Marye!¹⁴⁴

[Thomas Chestre, who made this tale,...about this Launfal, famous for Chivalry...May
 Jesus, who is Heaven's King, and His mother, Mary, bless all of us. Amen.]

Meanwhile, the author of *Tomas off Ersseldoune* establishes a religious preference stating:

Bot jhesu crist, þat dyed on tre,
 Saue jnglysche mene whare-so þay fare¹⁴⁵.

[But Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, saved all Englishmen whatever their
 circumstances.]

In both of these passages, the authors emphasize the preeminence of a religious influence. We must consider why the authors, while emphasizing magical influence throughout their romances, still feel compelled to not only draw on religious language, but explicitly state the dominance of religious authority. The strange tension between magic and religion in these texts, as authors both blend and distinguish the two to suit their desires, seems to point to the natural ways in which magic and religion occupy similar spaces and function in similar ways to the audience, but are being differentiated by the authors in an attempt to maintain a distinction which serves to further undermine the authority attributed to the female characters.

The value of this hybridization of religion and magic, specifically in relation to the female characters, lies in whether or not the author uses this blending of supernatural elements to obscure the identity of the female character. While the language used to discuss the virgin martyr saints' relation to magic never attempts to muddy their inherent identity as human, mortal women acting as agents for an authority, the same cannot be said for the fairy mistresses'

¹⁴⁴ *Sir Launfal*, ll. 1039-1044

¹⁴⁵ *Tomas off Ersseldoune*, ll. 23-24

connection to the divine. In other words, while the fairy mistresses' depiction parallels divine beings, therefore reinforcing their identity as an 'other', the virgin martyrs are merely accused of *using* witchcraft rather than *being* magical. We have seen the virgin martyrs accused of using witchcraft in the examples above, however, their role as a human conduit of that power was never elevated to a role of authority as is the case with the fairy mistresses' connection with both magic and religion. The fairies are not simply using magic; in fact, most, if not all, of the magic in the texts examined here is at best implied. The fairies *are* magical; it is a part of their identity and therefore creates an inherent distance between them and the readers of the texts. By compounding the fairies' magical otherness with direct correlations to divine beings, the romance authors further divorce their female characters from the medieval discursive structure in a way that separates them even from the virgin martyrs. The fairies, in their possession of authority, are placed as far outside the existing hierarchy as possible, with identities grounded in the inhuman. The combination of these supernatural elements in the identities of the fairy lovers serves as further proof that a woman's possession of authority exists only from without the medieval social structure and that, while engaging and admirable, the fairy lovers (and their authority) are not imitable.

Conclusion

In this project, we have moved beyond the simple delineation between female characters who possess agency and those who are merely an object occupying limited space in the text. Instead of viewing female agency as an on/off switch that leaves medieval writers either writing fully enlightened or in the pitch darkness, it is more prudent to view female characters' agency as attached to a dimmer switch, where authors can manipulate the power and authority they allow (albeit along the set, confined track of the patriarchal framework). Medieval authors rarely (if ever) completely enable their female characters to not only wield power but to maintain authority over that power (i.e., the switch in the 'on' position) without undermining that authority in some way; rather, the authors toggle the switch up the slide a bit depending on the circumstance in order to create situations where female characters are able to manipulate their power and authority within the confines of the patriarchal society in which the texts exist. Whether or not the stories enable an escape from society's patriarchal discursive structure, the texts themselves still exist in and must conform to English society in the Middle Ages. These moments of nudging and manipulating within the set structure are where the bulk of our attention lies in this study.

Fairy mistresses and virgin martyr saints are just two of many complex and dynamic female character tropes available for study for medieval literary scholars, and this project admittedly focuses on a tiny portion of relevant texts, but the texts examined demonstrate the ways in which these extraordinary female characters are used to make a larger statement about opportunities and privileges afforded, or not afforded, to women during the Middle Ages. We see with striking commonality how even when endowed with marvelous power or authority, the medieval authors never fail to expound upon the many ways in which their female characters are, in fact, exceptional. They may be wondered at and remarked upon for their awe-inspiring actions

or influence, but ultimately, they cannot be accepted as a legitimate exemplar for the feminine circumventing the patriarchal framework they occupy.

Magic and religion in these texts tend to serve similar purposes as they enable both the fairy lovers and virgin martyrs. The authors' anxiety around the blending of the two supernatural forces, however, is evident in their incessant reminders to the reader that magic and religion are distinct and even the secular texts privilege the divine power over the magical. The distinction drawn in the texts is somewhat counter to our understanding of how magic and religion would have inhabited similar spaces in the cultural consciousness and indicates there must be a reason that the author finds it so necessary to define distinct categories. This paper lends to the idea that an answer lies in the extent to which each external force enables the female characters and whether or not this would be seen as a legitimized avenue for women. It is clear that magic is the only influence which allows for a woman to have complete autonomy and as such a threat to the medieval discursive structure, it needs to be irrevocably severed from infringing upon reality. The over-emphasis on magic's unreachable 'otherness' and the divine's alternative patriarchal hierarchy only reaffirms the notion that while medieval female characters could exhibit considerable power and even authority, the authors and the culture into which these texts were born would take every opportunity to qualify the actions of these characters in order to resituate women in a subordinate position.

I hope this paper leaves readers with a more complex understanding of female power and authority and their relation to magic and religion. There is no good way to apply a universal feminist lens to medieval texts because, more often than not, the authors simply would not and could not write in that way. The patriarchal structure was (and is) so embedded in society that the idea of complete female autonomy was an overt threat to the deeply ingrained beliefs that

defined the culture and could not be let to stand. This study shows that it is possible to empower female characters to a limited extent (even within medieval England's extremely male-centric society) but at the end of the day, they are still confined to their patriarchal landscape. In spite of all this, female characters can and should be studied in all their complexity and nuance; if we are to understand the limitations and expectations placed on medieval women, seeing how the patriarchal society in which they live portrays the supposedly empowered women through texts will illuminate the gradation of female agency.

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Vita

A native Georgian, Katherine Haire spent most of her life in metro-Atlanta. She attended the University of Georgia where she received a Bachelor of Arts in English with concentrations in Medieval Literature and Creative Writing. While pursuing her undergraduate degree, Katherine was lucky enough to spend a semester studying at The University of Oxford where her love of medieval history and literature only deepened, convincing her to pursue a graduate degree. She chose to attend the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to pursue a Master of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Medieval Literature. Her research interests include medieval women's literacy, manuscript studies, and feminist critiques of medieval texts. She is extremely grateful for all the support she has received from family, friends, and faculty as she ends this stage in her life and begins her career.