



BERNARD CORNWELL A LITERATURE FOR “TOUGH GUYS”?

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ABSTRACT

The literary series *Saxon Stories* (2004-), by the British author Bernard Cornwell, incites reflections about the relations between Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons in British territory in the ninth century, as it presents a panorama of that historical moment. Fiction and history clash to represent significant moments of the narrated period. Starting there, the goal of this article is to discuss the memories that flow in the work concerning its production context that surrounds the author and that implies Gender Study issues exteriorized and interiorized by the work under study. From the idea that the work of the British author Bernard Cornwell is literature made for men, proposed by the Brazilian blogger *Sedentário Hiperativo* (2010), we seek to analyse moments of the narrative present in the first three volumes of *Saxon Stories*, in order to understand the motivation and legitimacy for such assertion. Our analysis is grounded in Badinter (1992), Connel and Messerschmidt (2013), Dumézil (2013), in order to discuss the history of masculinities; Mingo (2017), to support our perspective regarding Cornwell's literary work; and Langer (2007; 2017), to address the history of Scandinavians in medieval times.

RESUMO

A leitura da série literária *Saxon Stories* (2004-), do autor britânico Bernard Cornwell, incita reflexões acerca das relações entre escandinavos e anglo-saxões no território britânico no século IX, pois apresenta um panorama desse momento histórico. Ficção e história entram em confronto, a fim de representar momentos significativos da época relatada. A partir disso, o principal objetivo deste artigo é traçar debates acerca das memórias que fluem na obra relativamente ao seu contexto de produção, na contemporaneidade, que circundam o autor e que implicam questões de Estudo de Gênero exteriorizadas e interiorizadas pela obra em estudo. Partindo da ideia proposta pelo blogueiro brasileiro *Sedentário Hiperativo* (2010), de que a obra do autor britânico, Bernard Cornwell, é literatura feita para “macho”, buscamos analisar momentos da narrativa presente nos três primeiros volumes de *Saxon Stories*, com o fim de compreender a motivação para tal assertiva e verificar se ela é válida ou não. Nossa análise se fundamenta em Badinter (1992) e Connel e Messerschmidt (2013), Dumézil (2013), para discutir acerca da história das masculinidades; Mingo (2017), para corroborar com nossos estudos da obra de Cornwell; e Langer (2007; 2017), para tratar da história dos escandinavos no período medieval.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Bernard Cornwell; masculinities; English literature

KEY-WORDS

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Bernard Cornwell, who was born in London in 1944, is a narrator of the history of his British origins. Not only does he narrate, but he also creates and recreates remarkable historical events. The author seems to propose in his work a new reading of English History, in which historical characters meet fictional characters, shaping a new story. The vast majority of his books, all based on significant historical moments, mainly referring to the British territory, “are connected with the warlike and military world” (MINGO, 2017, p. 11).

For this article, we analyze some points, regarding Gender Studies, in the first three volumes of Bernard Cornwell’s *Saxon Stories*¹. Firstly, it is undeniable that the narrative tells the story of men since it is set in a historical context in which power and representation were almost entirely performed by men. The series recounts, through fiction, the history of England during the period of the Scandinavian invasions of the 9th century. The narrative mainly involves the clash of powers between the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples, leading to broader reflections on the confrontations between Christians and pagans. In this sense, militarism is a substantial theme in *Saxon Stories*, since the series portrays an era marked by the struggle for land not only between the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians but also between these peoples and the descendants of the ancient Celts (the Scots, Bretons, Welsh, Irish). However, being a fictional narrative of the period, as well as contemporary writing, the female figure has reclaimed her space in this story. In this article, we identify different women characters who are decisive to the events of the narrative, such as an Anglo-saxon girl who is very smart and became a “viking” and a Breton princess who is feared for her supposed powers.

To investigate this idea, we propose a discussion based on some theorists of Gender Studies, such as Badinter (1992), Connel and Messerschmidt (2013), and also, the medievalist Dumézil (2013), who discusses about the masculine identity of the medieval barbarian. Moreover, we briefly situate the considerations of Mingo (2017) regarding another work of Cornwell, the trilogy *The Warlord Chronicles* (1995-1998), which, according to the researcher, exposes remarkable and influent female characters.

Cornwell’s works, including *Saxon Stories*, could be considered a literature written specially for male readers, since his literary narratives contextualize the Middle Ages, a period marked by much violence, having the man as the protagonist of this scenario. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss about masculinities and gender in this article. Bearing that in mind, we assert that the memories present in *Saxon Stories* do not only reverberate a distant historical past, but also, our present, bringing to contemporary readers new perceptions about their own identity.

The motivation for the discussion we propose here came when we found, during

¹ *The Last Kingdom* (2004), *The Pale Horseman* (2005) e *The Lords of the North* (2006).

our research for material about Bernard Cornwell on the internet, the post entitled “*Bernard Cornwell, ou como se faz literatura de verdade pra macho...*”² by the Brazilian blog *Sedentário & Hiperativo*. The reader who wrote this text explains his assumption, already exposed in the title, citing the essential presence of militarism in the productions of the British author Bernard Cornwell, who narrates the bloody and violent facts in a very detailed way. But what is most striking, at first, is that the blogger begins his text by differentiating *chick-lit*, as “literature target at younger women”, from *tough lit*, an expression created by himself from the term *tough guy* to define literature made especially for male readers:

Nowadays there is a term that has been used a lot: chick-lit.

The expression refers to literature aimed specifically at the female public (in a free translation it would be something like: “literature for little women”).

It is where stories emerge about women wanting to lose weight to get a boyfriend; looking for ways to control their credit cards; gossiping in rich men’s schools or grabbing any angel or undead shining around.

Whatever; if they like it, we have to respect the opposite sex’s way of constructing reasoning.

The big question, however, that remains is: okay, and if the publishing market has been invaded by works for women, what is left on the shelves to represent the legitimate “macho” literature?

Turn down the volume in the background there and open that beer in your teeth, my friend.

Let’s talk about real masculine literature... [...]

In English, there is an expression for the macho guy, that bully style, bully hero of the 80s: he is the so-called tough guy.

Based on this principle, and in the absence of an expression that represents the complete opposite of chick-lit, I started using the expression tough lit for this anabolic literature, that may bore at first the female public, but lead the male public to the primitive ecstasy of an MMA grandstand. [...]

And well, it’s not something as simple as it seems at first, but fortunately, there are some writers out there who can translate this testosterone style of writing exquisitely.

Cornwell is one of the best of them (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010, our translation).³

² In English: “Bernard Cornwell, or how to make real literature for tough guys...”. Available at: <http://www.sedentario.org/columas/cavernas-e-dragoes/bernard-cornwell-ou-como-se-faz-literatura-de-verdade-pra-macho-32122>. Accessed on: 30 Abr. 2021

³ Hoje em dia existe um termo que anda bastante utilizado por aí: o *chick lit*. A expressão se refere a uma literatura voltada especificamente para o público feminino (em tradução livre seria algo como: “literatura para mulherzinha”). É de onde surgem histórias sobre mulheres querendo perder peso para arrumar namorado; procurando formas de controlar os cartões de créditos; fazendo fofocas em escolas de ricos ou agarrando qualquer anjo ou morto-vivo que brilhe por aí. Que seja; se elas gostam disso, nós temos de respeitar a forma de construção de raciocínio do sexo oposto. A grande questão, porém, que fica é: ok, e se o mercado editorial anda invadido pelas obras para a mulherada, o que sobra nas prateleiras para representar a legítima literatura de macho? Abaixo o volume do jogo no fundo aí e abra essa cerveja no dente, meu amigo. Vamos falar de literatura para macho de verdade... [...]. Em inglês existe uma expressão para o cara machão, aquele de estilo valentão, herói brigão dos anos 80: ele é o chamado *tough guy*. Partindo desse princípio, e na falta de uma expressão que represente todo o oposto da *chick lit*, eu passei a utilizar a expressão: *tough lit* para essa

The blogger defines literature by the opposition feminine *versus* masculine. The American psychologist Ruth Hartley brings important contributions when she states that the masculine identity is constructed by the differentiation of the feminine. Thus, “many boys define masculinity simply by saying: ‘what is not feminine’” (HARTLEY, 1959, p. 458 *apud* BADINTER, 1992, p. 34, our translation)⁴. In addition, Elizabeth Badinter explains that the masculine is associated to possessing, taking, penetrating, dominating while the feminine is related to the “fact of being possessed, docile, passive, submissive” (1992, p. 99, our translation)⁵. Nowadays, as a consequence of this idea of opposition of the genders, the masculine identity would also be characterised by subjugating his power over the feminine: “to *have* a woman in order to *not be* a woman” (BADINTER, 1992, p. 99, our translation)⁶. Therefore, in this article we use the terms man/male *versus* woman/female⁷ to refer to the characters of *Saxon Stories* enhance or contradict this traditional opposition of feminine *versus* masculine.

In his text, *Sedentario Hiperativo* warns his readers that, to get into Cornwell’s “masculine literature”, it is necessary to pay attention to which books to choose in order to start reading. Or in the words of the blogger: “not all his series have the same level. It’s good to keep that in mind so you don’t start with the least ideal reads” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010, our translation)⁸. So, he imperatively suggests: “Here’s the deal: do you want to read Cornwell? Start with *The Warlord Chronicles*. Full stop” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010, our translation)⁹. The blogger defines *The Warlord Chronicles* as the author’s masterpiece, or rather “one of the best examples of *tough lit* we have around here” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010, our translation)¹⁰.

On the other hand, another reader, situated in the academic environment, the researcher Carlos Sanz Mingo (2017), outlines different considerations about this same work. He believes that *The Warlord Chronicles* falls within the Postmodernism. One of the characteristics that he identifies in this Cornwell’s work refers to strong women who appear in Literature, even if “it could seem a paradox to talk about feminism in such a tale of masculinity, with warriors, battles and blood” (MINGO, 2017, p. 27). Mingo argues

literatura anabolizada, que pode entediar a princípio o público feminino, mas levar o masculino ao êxtase primitivo de uma arquibancada de MMA. [...] E bem, não é algo assim tão simples quanto parece a princípio, mas felizmente existem por aí alguns escritores que conseguem traduzir esse estilo testosterona de escrever de maneira primorosa. Cornwell é um dos melhores deles (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010).

⁴ “muitos meninos definem a masculinidade simplesmente dizendo: ‘o que não é feminino’” (HARTLEY, 1959, p. 458 *apud* BADINTER, 1992, p. 34).

⁵ “fato de ser possuída, dócil, passiva, submissa” (BADINTER, 1992, p. 99).

⁶ “*ter* uma mulher para não *ser* uma mulher” (BADINTER, 1992, p. 99).

⁷ In *Saxon Stories*, as well as in this article, men/male and women/female are those characters who possess the male sex and the female sex respectively.

⁸ “nem todas as suas séries possuem o mesmo nível. É bom ter isso em mente para não começar pelas leituras menos ideais” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010).

⁹ “É o seguinte: quer ler Cornwell? Comece por *As Crônicas de Artur*. Ponto” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010).

¹⁰ “um dos melhores exemplares de *tough lit* que temos por aqui” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010).

that in *The Warlord Chronicles* there are four female characters who are decisive for the progress of the narrative, acting with agency, and not passively, as most women tend to be represented by the traditional historical novel. The author further adds:

Several scholars, such as Bennett and Royle (2004), Gilbert and Gubar (1979) or Irigaray (1985) have pointed out the main characteristics of feminine characters in literary works. The conclusion of these authors is that these characters are mainly passive, non-practical, subordinate, emotional, mother, weak, irrational and absent, as opposed to the male ones, which are active, practical, superior, unemotional, father, strong, rational and present. The feminist theories in Postmodernism, since we cannot talk about just one, have turned these ideas upside down and we want to show how Cornwell has also followed these new theories when elaborating his female characters (MINGO, 2017, p. 29).

We chose the *Saxon Stories* series, another significant work by Bernard Cornwell, to find out how this particular set of stories could agree with or refute the perspective of the researcher Carlos Sanz Mingo and the defense of the blogger *Sedentario Hiperativo*.

In *The Last Kingdom*, the first book, the female character who stands out is Brida, the protagonist's first lover, an Anglo-Saxon woman who is captured by the Danes and who, just like Uhtred, comes to like them and considers herself belonging to the group. She is shown to always be an intelligent and influential mind, not afraid of anything. As Uhtred states, Brida "considered herself as good as any boy" (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 112). With this statement, we see that while this female character gains a lot of prominence in the narrative, she is compared, in a way, to a man. Uhtred also relates: "She [Brida] came everywhere with us, spoke good Danish by now and was regarded as bringing luck by the men, who adored her" (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 127). Already here we notice how Brida stands out for being admired and adored by the Scandinavian men. But her intelligence and audacity are what would characterize the character the most, as we can see at the moment when Uhtred reports that his Anglo-Saxon friend, the blacksmith Ealdwulf, is a great charades teller, and cites one of his most complicated charades, which the protagonist cannot solve until he tells Brida:

I could not guess that one, nor could any of the Danes, and Ealdwulf refused to give me the answer even when I begged him and it was only when I told the riddle to Brida that I learned the solution. 'A cuckoo, of course', she said instantly. She was right, of course (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 136).

Brida is not a passive character, as she has a great influence on the actions of the protagonist, Uhtred, who acts most of the time impulsively. Moreover, another important aspect about the character is that she gets involved with sorcery, as we can observe in the



following excerpt:

And there is magic in Serpent-Breath. Ealdwulf had his own spells that he would not tell me, the spells of the smith, and Brida took the blade into the woods for a whole night and never told me what she did with it, and those were the spells of a woman, and when we made the sacrifice of the pit slaughter, and killed a man, a horse, a ram, a bull and a drake, I asked Ragnar to use Serpent-Breath on the doomed man so that Odin would know she existed and would look well on her. Those are the spells of a pagan and a warrior (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 142).

Here we see a certain opposition between woman and man, concerning sorcery. Each one with her/his own spells. Occasionally, we highlight another female character, present in the second volume, *The Pale Horseman*, who is also related to witchcraft: Iseult. Unlike Brida, who was Anglo-Saxon but considered herself a Dane, Iseult was of the Breton tribe, descendants of the ancient Celts, and Uhtred met her on his first trip to the region of Cornwall. At that time, the Breton inhabitants of Cornwall were already mostly Christianised; however, some ancient beliefs remained in their memories. This can be seen when Uhtred relates that “[...] despite her youth, she managed to scare Peredur’s courtiers, who backed away from her. The king looked nervous, while Asser, standing beside me, made the sign of the cross, [...]” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 52). She was queen, but everyone feared her, for they charged that she was a “queen of shadows”. The Welsh monk, Asser, explains to Uhtred the reason for this belief:

He did not like talking about it, but he had raised the subject of Iseult’s evil and so he reluctantly explained. “She was born in the springtime,” he said, “eighteen years ago, and at her birth there was an eclipse of the sun, and the folk here are credulous fools and they believe a dark child born at sun’s death has power. They made her into a” – he paused, not knowing the Danish word – “a *grawch*,” he said, a word that meant nothing to me. “*Dewines*,” he said irritably and, when I still showed incomprehension, he at last found a word. “A sorceress.” [...] “And Peredur married her. Made her his shadow queen. That is what kings did with such girls. They take them into their households so they may use their power.”
 “What power?”
 “The skills the devil gives to shadows queens, of course,” he said irritably. “Peredur believes she can see the future. But it is a skill she will retain only so long as she is a virgin.” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 55)

We note that her own husband, Peredur (Iseult was one of his wives), feared her. However, he kept her as a slave, because he believed and wanted to take advantage of her powers. If we think about masculinity, we see how this passage reaffirms the fear of the feminine. During the narrative in *Saxon Stories*, it is noticeable that the woman, when

possessing features that differ from the feminine stereotype, causes fear to the male characters. As Badinter (1992) mentions, this fear is due to the belief that there is the contamination of masculine by feminine, widespread in different types of society.

Moreover, the protagonist Uhtred does not see in Iseult only a woman with magical powers. He compares her to his former lover, Brida, who, according to him, “was as full of fury as a scabbard is filled with blade, and I sensed the same in this queen who was so young and strange and dark and lovely” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 53). From the moment he sees Iseult, Uhtred becomes obsessed with her. After killing Peredur in an attack, Uhtred takes Iseult with him to his abode in Wessex, where his Saxon wife, Mildrith, lived.

Mildrith is an ordinary woman, very religious, and who only wishes to have peace. While Iseult “had a soul as wild as a falcon”, the poor Mildrith, as Uhtred refers to her, only “wanted order and routine. She wanted the hall swept, the clothes clean, the cows milked, the sun to rise, the sun to set, and for nothing to change [...]” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 77). This sounds like a justification of why Uhtred prefers Iseult and betrays his then-wife. Uhtred begins not to bear her anymore. We verify, in this sense, that the protagonist always values women instilled with fury, or women who possess more traditionally masculine features, which brings them closer to the values of warrior men.

Uhtred describes that, during the battle of Ethandun, Iseult and Hild, a nun who also has an important role in *Saxon Stories*, tried to resist bravely against the men, defending themselves with weapons such as swords and spears. Hild survives, but Iseult is murdered with an axe to the head. At the moment he receives the news, Uhtred confesses, “I was weeping, but I did not know whether it was sorrow or anger that consumed me” (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 335). This moment contradicts the following statement by the blogger *Sedentario Hiperativo*: “the first lesson of a real tough lit is that readers of authors like Cornwell don’t cry!” (2010, our translation)¹¹. The blogger implies that Cornwell’s *tough* readers do not show their feelings, and, consequently, neither do the male characters in his work. Uhtred is an example that contradicts this statement because despite being very reluctant to keep his virile characteristics, he shows that he is also a kind man, who has emotions.

In the third volume, *The Lords of the North*, Uhtred meets the love of his life, Gisela, a Dane. Gisela’s brother, King Guthred, tells Uhtred that he intends to grant his sister’s hand to Ivar Ivarsson. At this moment, the protagonist confesses: “My heart sank, but I tried to show nothing” (CORNWELL, 2007, p. 134). He admits that he has feelings, but most of the time he omits them, to maintain his masculine behavior. Another interesting

¹¹ “a primeira lição de uma *tough lit* de verdade é que leitor de autores como Cornwell não chora!” (SEDENTARIO HIPERATIVO, 2010)

moment, in the same book, is a conversation between the protagonist and his then-lover, Hild, who had been a nun before the massacre by the Danes in the convent where she lived:

[...] She reached out and touched my arm. 'I think, sometimes, I am the only friend you have here. So let me stay till I know you're safe.'
I smiled at her and touched Serpent-Breath's hilt. 'I'm safe,' I said.
'Your arrogance,' she said, 'blinds folk to your kindness.' [...] (CORNWELL, 2007, p. 134)

If the construction of the masculine identity is made primarily by the differentiation to what is feminine, it is possible to understand that sentimentality and kindness would be linked to the feminine and, therefore, men should not be susceptible to these feelings. Uhtred strives not to show his feelings and thus prevail as an example of manliness. One of his defensive actions to leave no evidence of his sentimentality is to touch his sword: *Snake's breath*. This weapon was, for the Germanic warrior man, the most valuable item he owned, given that "its carrying went beyond its technical and military advantages: it was a symbol of prestige and power" (LANGER, 2017, p. 230, our translation)¹². Among all the symbolisms that this object conveyed to the man were "the loyalty to his lord, the excitement of battle, the achievement of masculinity" (LANGER, 2017, p. 233, our translation)¹³.

According to Badinter (1992), there is no universal masculine model, because masculinity is not an essence, but an ideology that tends to justify the domination of men, only replacing the power of man over woman. The construction of the masculine identity has always faced numerous difficulties. But these difficulties are increasingly accentuated nowadays, because as Badinter points out:

Without his ancient defences, men expose their wounds, often in the flesh. It is enough to read the European and North American male literature of the last fifteen years to grasp the whole palette of feelings that assault him: anger, anguish, fear of women, impotence, loss of his references, hatred of himself and others, etc. A common trait in all these texts: the man who weeps (BADINTER, 1992, p. 36, our translation)¹⁴.

¹² "[...] seu porte ia além de suas vantagens técnicas e militares: era símbolo de prestígio e poder" (LANGER, 2017, p. 230).

¹³ "[...] a lealdade ao seu senhor, o excitemento da batalha, a realização da masculinidade" (LANGER, 2017, p. 233)

¹⁴ Sem as defesas milenares, o homem expõe seus ferimentos, com frequência em carne viva. Basta ler a literatura masculina europeia e norte-americana dos últimos quinze anos para captar toda a paleta de sentimentos que o tomam de assalto: cólera, angústia, medo das mulheres, impotência, perda de suas referências, ódio de si e do outro etc. Um traço comum a todos esses textos: o homem que chora (BADINTER, 1992, p. 36).

In *Saxon Stories*, we see some of these traits, such as the fear of women and the man who cries. Even reluctantly, Uhtred shows his feelings and emotions many times, including crying. Johnni Langer (2007), in his review of the first book of the series, *The Last Kingdom*, states that, although Bernard Cornwell brings in his narrative many historical aspects important to the period and deconstructs many stereotypes of the Vikings, there are some descriptions which are historical mistakes. One of them refers to the act of crying:

The characters Ragnar and Uhtred cry on several occasions (p. 306). We consider that a literary anachronism, since many Arabic, Latin and Scandinavian sources attested that crying was shameful for a Norse warrior in the Middle Ages, this being a social function of women (Brøndsted, [n.d.]: 209). (LANGER, 2007, p. 204, our translation)¹⁵.

Anachronism or not, *Saxon Stories* is contemporary literature, and we understand that many aspects can escape from the narrated period to situate the readers, who are aware not only about a distant past but also about their own present time. In this way, at the same time that Uhtred can be a representation of the masculine stereotype, he faces many difficulties to build and maintain his virile identity.

The female characters have a great influence on the actions of the protagonist Uhtred, as well as on History itself, which is represented in the narrative. They are very active characters in the story, and not merely passive. In addition, it is worth noting that although the protagonist Uhtred tries to represent the tough and brave warrior of medieval times, he is an irrational character, most of the time acting on impulse and by his instincts of war and violence. His reason is guided precisely by the female characters with whom he coexists. Here we notice a flaw in the totality of the virility represented by the character.

Badinter (1992) mentions several crises of virility during human history. According to the author, these crises have always happened due to feminine revolutions, whether they were of small or great scope and impact. As a result, the fear of the feminine, or rather, the fear of losing power to the feminine, has always tormented the masculine. Consequently, at each crisis, in an attempt to recover their superiority over women, new forms emerge in the arts, sports and social habits to reaffirm men's virility. For example, the crisis of American manhood between the 19th and 20th centuries found the following means:

The separation of the sexes and occupations is exalted. Football and baseball

¹⁵ Os personagens Ragnar e Uhtred choram em várias ocasiões (p. 306). Consideramos isso um anacronismo literário, visto que várias fontes árabes, latinas e escandinavas atestavam que o choro era vergonhoso para um guerreiro nórdico na Idade Média, sendo esta uma função social da mulher (Brøndsted, [s.d.]: 209) (LANGER, 2007, p. 204).

become very popular, probably because, as a journalist observed in 1909, "the football field (a particularly violent sport) is the only place where male supremacy is undisputed". With the same aim, the institution of scouting is adopted, which aims to "save boys from the rottenness of urban civilisation" and to form tainted children, virile men. The hero of the Americans is Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States from 1901 to 1908 because he views traditional manly values [...]. Like phantasmatic sublimations, new heroes emerge in literature. The Wild West is revived and the emblematic figure of the cowboy is invented, a virile man par excellence: "Violent but honourable, a tireless fighter with his phallic revolver, defending women without ever being dominated by them". [...] Despite all this, many men are unable to calm their anguish. It was the entry of the United States into the war in 1917 that served as a test of manhood for many of them. Convinced that they were fighting for a good cause, the men could both vent their pent-up violence and prove to themselves at last that they were truly macho men (BADINTER, 1992, p. 21-22, our translation)¹⁶.

Currently, the popular culture demonstrates a great interest for the medieval world. Besides the great sale of books related to the theme, a specific example that can be cited is the great success of the television series *Vikings*, which premiered in 2013, in Canada. Our object of study, *Saxon Stories*, also gained a television version, the series *The Last Kingdom*, produced by the BBC in 2015. Moreover, other examples that can be cited are *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the superhero *Thor*, and the series *Game of Thrones*, which create fantastic worlds that merge the memory of the medieval.

One of the features of the medieval man represented in *Saxon Stories* reinforces that man must endure pain. Many warrior characters have scars on their bodies and faces, in the protagonist's descriptions. An example is when, in *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred observes Ragnar, who "stripped to his waist, his scarred chest broad in the flamelight [...]" (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 60). Uhtred adopts Ragnar as a father, the Dane warrior who influences the masculine construction of the protagonist, and, in this excerpt, we verify that this figure is full of scars that represent his ferocity, or specifically, how much he has endured pain, showing that he is not only a great warrior but a great example of man.

In the following excerpt, taken from the first book, *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred sees the Scandinavians for the first time and describes one of them, Ragnar: "The man

¹⁶ Exalta-se a separação dos sexos e das ocupações. Futebol e beisebol tornam-se muito populares, provavelmente porque, como observava um jornalista em 1909, "o campo de futebol (esporte particularmente violento) é o único lugar onde a supremacia masculina é incontestável". Com o mesmo objetivo, adota-se a instituição do escotismo, que tem como objetivos "salvar os meninos da podridão da civilização urbana" e formar crianças máculas, homens viris. O herói dos americanos é Theodore Roosevelt, presidente dos Estados Unidos de 1901 a 1908, porque ele encara os valores viris tradicionais. [...] Como sublimações fantasmáticas, surgem novos heróis na literatura. Faz-se reviver o Oeste selvagem e inventa-se a figura emblemática do caubói, homem viril por excelência: "Violento, mas honrado, combatente infatigável munido de seu revólver fálico, defendendo as mulheres sem jamais ser dominado por elas". [...] A despeito de tudo isso, muitos homens não conseguem serenar sua angústia. Foi a entrada dos Estados Unidos na guerra, em 1917, que serviu de exultório e de "teste de virilidade" para muitos deles. Convencidos de que se batiam por uma boa causa, os homens podiam ao mesmo tempo dar vazão à sua violência represada e provar a si próprios, finalmente, que eram verdadeiros machos. (BADINTER, 1992, p. 21-22)

bestrides the saddle had long, long hair the colour of pale gold, hair that tossed like the horses' tails as he rode" (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 10). Another passage that catches our attention is taken from the second volume, *The Pale Horseman*, at the moment when Uhtred sees the Scandinavian Svein of the White Horse for the first time: "The Danish leader slowly pulled off his helmet and his face was almost as frightening as the boar-snouted mask" (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 61).

These examples compare the Scandinavian warrior man with animals. In the first passage, the protagonist Uhtred compares Ragnar, in a way, to a horse by making references to his hair. The horse is an emblematic animal in history, especially in military history, since it is always present in contexts of war and battles so that it demonstrates strength, agility, bravery. Dumézil (2013) explains that the appreciation of the horse starts to spread in the Carolingian era, which is marked by the ascendancy of Germanic barbarian peoples, and this diffusion of the importance of the animal simultaneously featured itself with masculine connotations, as long as "the infantryman effectively loses all possibility of triumph on the battlefield; only the knight can claim to embody the fullness of manly values" (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 146, our translation)¹⁷. The second excerpt compares the frightening essence of the Scandinavian with the boar mask that he used. This animal would be notable for its ferocity and savagery and therefore can be associated with the attributes of the Scandinavian warrior man. Reflecting on the virility of barbarian peoples, Dumézil (2013) first brings the Roman point of view, in which he describes that the value of the Germanic constitutes more a product of nature than of culture, being the barbarians close to animality¹⁸. This perhaps explains the associations of the Scandinavians to certain animals present in Cornwell's narrative.

This animality endowed to the Scandinavians can be defined by the relevance of the warrior practices by these peoples. As Dumézil explains, archaeological analyses verify that "the contents of the graves confirm, in the first place, the importance that men gave to warrior activity" (2013, p. 134, our translation)¹⁹. Thus, for the Scandinavians, as for any other Germanic people, "to be a man is to be able to wield weapons, even in death" (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 134, our translation)²⁰. The barbarian peoples, especially the Vikings, have always been characterised by their savagery in the eyes of the Christianised

¹⁷ "O soldado de infantaria perde efetivamente toda a possibilidade de triunfar no campo de batalha; somente o cavaleiro pode pretender encarnar a plenitude dos valores viris" (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 146).

¹⁸ Such a statement does not refer exceptionally to the Scandinavian peoples, but the Germanic barbarian peoples of the fifth and sixth centuries. However, we emphasise that the Scandinavian peoples, especially the Vikings, who appear almost two centuries later, besides being of Germanic descent, were also both considered as barbarians, "uncivilised", by the already Christianised Western Europe. In other words, the Scandinavians still maintained the ancient culture once practised by the ancient Germanic barbarian peoples. Therefore, we believe that Dumézil's study about the masculinity of barbarian peoples is of great value to this article.

¹⁹ "[...] o conteúdo das sepulturas confirma, em primeiro lugar, a importância que os homens acordam à atividade guerreira" (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 134).

²⁰ "[...] ser um macho é ser capaz de empunhar armas, até na morte" (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 134).

peoples. To consolidate this statement, we cite another example, Leo Diaconus, a Byzantine who describes the battle performance of the Rus, a tribe of Vikings that “had come down from Sweden by the Dnieper River and settled in Eastern Europe” (MIRANDA, 2016, p. 98, our translation)²¹. Diaconus mentions that the Rus “bellowed animalistic sounds, a strange and shocking manner that frightened and destabilized their enemies” (MIRANDA, 2016, p. 99, our translation)²².

A strong motif in *Saxon Stories* is militarism, which is staged in the descriptions of battles experienced by the protagonist and narrator Uhtred. This character frequently signals the values of a Scandinavian warrior, which are even values consolidated by his Nordic religiosity, in contrast to the values of Anglo-Saxons, who compromise Christian values. About this matter, Dumézil states:

A beautiful death crowns a beautiful existence. Why does the barbarian remain more virile than others? No doubt because the society in which he lives categorises individuals exclusively according to their warrior skills. When he can no longer fight, the Germanic man is thus coerced to join women in the work in the fields, according to the testimony of Tacitus. On that day, he practically ceases to be a man. Many would rather grow old in the army than suffer such opprobrium (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 129, our translation)²³.

The Scandinavian religiosity is defined by the values of war. If a man dies in battle, his soul automatically gains a place in Valhalla. *Paradise of warriors* would be the traditional metaphor that defines the Valhöl (hall of the dead), which is disseminated in this way in *Saxon Stories*. However, Johnni Langer (2015) brings other perspectives about the term. One of them is from Dumézil himself, who interprets Valhalla as a transposition from the current social model in the ancient Germanic world to the myths: the ideal life of the conquering groups. In Cornwell’s narrative, for example, we observe a character that appears in the third volume, *The Lords of the North*, Bolti:

He was a Dane called Bolti and he had survived the massacre because he was married to a Saxon and his wife’s family had sheltered him. [...]
He was a plump man, bald, with a pocked face, a broken nose and frightened eyes. [...]
I noticed that Bolti, despite being a Dane, wore a cross about his neck and he saw me looking at it.

²¹ “[...] havia descido da Suécia pelo rio Dnieper e se instalado no leste europeu” (MIRANDA, 2016, p. 98).

²² “berravam sons animalescos, uma maneira estranha e chocante que assustavam e desestabilizavam seus inimigos” (MIRANDA, 2016, p. 99).

²³ Uma bela morte coroa uma bela existência. Por que o bárbaro permanece por mais tempo viril do que os outros? Sem dúvida porque a sociedade na qual ele vive categoriza os indivíduos exclusivamente em função das habilidades guerreiras. Quando não pode mais combater, o germânico vê-se assim coagido a juntar-se às mulheres nos trabalhos do campo, de acordo com o testemunho de Tácito. Naquele dia, ele praticamente cessa de ser homem. Muitos preferem envelhecer na tropa a sofrer tamanho opróbrío (DUMÉZIL, 2013, p. 129).

'In Eoferwic', he said, touching the cross, 'a man must live'. He pulled aside his coat and I saw Thor's hammer amulet had been hidden beneath it. 'They mostly killed pagans', he explained. (CORNWELL, 2007, p. 23-24)

Unlike the other Scandinavian characters previously analyzed, who had their barbaric virility reaffirmed by being associated with animalistic characteristics, Bolti has his body features lowered, in a way: fat, bald, a pocked face, a broken nose, eyes full of fear. This character can be an example of the man who ceases to be a man for not serving in the war but choosing to live a simple life as a merchant together with those who should be his enemy, the Anglo-Saxons. We also verify, through the representation of this character, how religion is linked to this conception of the man who ceases to be a man. Unlike the other Scandinavian characters in *Saxon Stories*, who are warriors and reaffirm their religiosity, ironizing Christianity, such as the elder Ravn, Ragnar's father, who states that "Christianity is a soft religion, [...] a woman's creed. It doesn't ennoble man, it makes them into worms. [...]" (CORNWELL, 2005, p. 85), Bolti omits his true belief in order to survive in the land of Christians. Thus, he is not the proper stereotype of the Scandinavian true man. Perhaps this explains why this character has his bodily features described in a rather despicable way.

Moreover, Ravn's conception of Christianity is an example of how masculinity is defined by the opposition to the feminine, which Badinter (1992) talks about. The character, by demeaning Christianity, arguing that it is a woman's creed, also demeans the feminine character. The protagonist himself, when talking about his first wife, Mildrith, describes her in a degrading way: "though I had not wanted to marry her and though I came to detest her, it was a lovely field to plow" (CORNWELL, 2006, p. 2). By saying that she was a lovely field to plow, Uhtred shows himself as the true *tough guy* hero.

In a way, the male figure prevails in most of the narrative in *Saxon Stories*, since the historical period narrated in the series was almost entirely led by men. For example, there are several scenes of rape and/or enslavement of women described with a certain naturalness by the protagonist in the narrative. If some readers interpret this as a way to reaffirm masculinity, others may understand it as a complaint of this practice, which was trivialized in the medieval context.

However, this also depends on how the masculine and feminine are shown in the text. Just as there are divergent masculinities in the story, as we show with the examples of the descriptions of the Scandinavians Ragnar, Sven and Bolti, we also identify that there are different women: many are submissive and humiliated, but, on the other hand, there are those who stand out. And even among the secondary characters, there are women who are more active than the men at certain times. Bolti's own daughters, for

example, at the moment when Uhtred orders him to kill the slaver: “Bolti did not move. He has too scared to obey me, but, to my surprise, his two daughters came and fetched Sven’s swords” (CORNWELL, 2007, p. 39).

It is worth questioning the ascendancy of this medieval memory in contemporary times: when feminisms are gaining more and more strength, would we be facing another great crisis of manhood? Perhaps this interest of the market in strengthening the medieval memory by means of art and media is an example of an attempt to regain the power of the masculine, because the stereotype of the medieval man, exceptionally the Viking, is loaded with characteristics that reaffirm the nature of men: violence, brutality, rudeness and, above all, courage.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that “masculinity represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (CONNELL; MESSERSCHMIDT; 2005, p. 841). In this sense, we should not speak of *masculinity*, but *masculinities*. In other words, a man may manifest a type of masculinity according to the social context in which he is inserted, because masculinity differs according to the times, but also according to social class, race and age of the man (BADINTER, 1992).

Cornwell’s literary fiction, by retelling a historical past, certainly shows itself as a place that holds memories related to certain historical and social contexts. *Saxon Stories*, for instance, focuses on the Viking Age, and its impacts on the creation of what we now know today as England. This period was marked by numerous violent conflicts, with man as the main actor in this scenario. In fact, most of Cornwell’s works expose the context of militarism and conflicting issues of the English past. Probably, because of that, the Brazilian blog *Sedentário Hiperativo* presents a text in which Bernard Cornwell is considered a writer of *literature for tough guys*.

Perhaps, when taking into account only the bloody context of militarism, staged almost mainly by men, the first conception that some readers make of Cornwell’s literature, since his works are mirrored in this scenario, may be of narratives made especially for men. In contrast, just as Professor Carlos Sanz Mingo, who, by analysing *The Warlord Chronicles* trilogy, highlights the importance of the female characters in Cornwell’s work, we identify in *Saxon Stories*, from the diegesis its first three books, women capable of transforming these (pre)concepts, striking female characters, one different from the other, but who somehow subvert the traditional features of women in Literature. In this sense, the literature of Bernard Cornwell goes far beyond a purpose that would only describe and serve to a masculine universe.



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