

Masculine crusaders, effeminate Greeks, and the female historian: Relations of power in Sir Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris*

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Abstract: *Gender employed as a methodological lens in the analysis of historical fiction can help to reveal implicit or explicit evaluative statements. It is deployed here to examine hierarchies in the military, political and cultural context of the encounter between 'virile' Westerners and 'effeminate' Greeks in Sir Walter Scott's last novel, Count Robert of Paris (1831), which is set in Constantinople at the start of the First Crusade (1096-7). Scott's depiction of Westerners and Orientalized Greeks is set against the geopolitical concerns of the author's own time. The gendered perspective through which Scott constructs relationships in Count Robert makes it clear that the ancestors of modern Britain and France must control the East, represented here by the Byzantine Greeks. On the other hand, Scott's ambivalent and fluctuating portrayal of the twelfth-century historiographer Anna Comnena as a fictional character in the novel reveals his own uncertain stance between rejection and admiration of the female historian, as well as a more complex approach to gender dynamics in times of change.*

Introduction

Sir Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris*, his penultimate novel and the last to be published in his lifetime, is not representative. Set in Constantinople at the outset of the First Crusade (1096), the novel deals with the period of the Eastern Roman Empire, better known as the Byzantine Empire. The novel, a product of Scott's grinding effort to get himself out of debt and fulfil his obligations to his creditors after his bankruptcy in 1826, met with moderate success when it was first published in 1831. It sold well, but it was not received enthusiastically by the critics. The *Edinburgh Literary Journal* remarks '[it] must rank among the least successful of Sir Walter's works' although it 'bear[s] traces of his genius' (The Walter Scott Digital Archive, 2011).

Count Robert is today one of Scott's least known and studied works. It is not an easy read. The historical background is relatively obscure. Scott's editorial team, son-in-law John Gibson Lockhart, publisher Robert Cadell, and printer James Ballantyne, were critical of the novel from the start, their objections 'initiating an acrimonious exchange of missives' with the author (Alexander 2006, 386). Cadell found the Greek names of the characters odd and difficult (Alexander 2006, 386); all three were unanimous in their condemnation of the episode in which two females fight in single combat and one of them is 'enceinte', as Cadell put it delicately (Alexander 2006, 397). The sprawling plot and weak structure drove Scott himself to despair. Eventually Lockhart made substantial changes to Scott's text. For over a century and a half Lockhart's heavily edited version was the published version. The 'original' novel was only published for the first time in 2006, in the definitive Edinburgh University Press re-edition of Scott's works.

Count Robert of Paris was inspired by an episode narrated in *The Alexiad*, the twelfth-century historiographical work by Anna Comnena,¹ daughter of the Greek emperor Alexius I Comnenus, who played a crucial part in initiating the First Crusade with his plea to Pope Urban II for forces that would aid him in his wars against the Seljuk Turks (Frankopan 2012). This episode, which Scott first encountered in Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) and used in his 'Essay on Chivalry' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Alexander 2006, 381), took place in the late winter of 1096 or spring of 1097, when the three principal contingents of the First Crusade had converged on Constantinople, their rendezvous before venturing out to Asia and the Holy Land. In Anna Comnena's account, during a meeting that Alexius held in the palace of Blachernai with the leaders of the Crusade, a French-Norman knight sat on the emperor's throne, disregarding palace etiquette. He was immediately reprimanded by Baldwin of Boulogne, the future first King of Jerusalem. Alexius, however, was not angry; he asked the man who he was and where he came from. The Crusader replied that he came from France, from a castle near the Chapel of the Virgin of the Broken Lance, and spent his days waiting there for passing knights whom he could call out to single combat, but no one had come so far. Alexius then told the quarrelsome man that he would soon have plenty of opportunities for fighting against the Turks, and offered him sensible advice to 'stay in the middle, and avoid being either in the vanguard or in the rear' (Komnene 1148, 292). That man was Count Robert of Paris, whose name Scott used for his novel, although he is not the protagonist. Around this episode Scott builds a convoluted plot with no clear structure or strong narrative arc. Scott's familiar tropes from the Gothic novel and the chivalric romance are somewhat stale; the anchoring of the novel within its historical setting, with many explicit references and quotations from the two historiographical works which inspired it, encumber the story, acting like an inertial force on the narrative and rendering the text rambling and tedious.

In spite of its weaknesses, *Count Robert* is a fascinating novel. In his representation of the first massive historical encounter between Greeks and Western Europeans during the First Crusade, Scott depicts effeminate Greeks and virile Crusaders from the West. By focusing on traits of sexualised identities, the novel makes evaluative statements, implicit or explicit, about the hierarchical relationship between the East and the West. Scott, a great admirer of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), adheres to Gibbon's derogatory portrayal of the Eastern Roman Empire, presenting Byzantium as a locus of deception, decadence, and moral degeneration. By representing the Greek characters as weak, effeminate, and passive, or given to machinations and intrigues, and the Western characters as honourable, brave, and honest, Scott follows Gibbon's view of the 'Lower Empire' as a decadent Rome, in which the manly, vigorous virtues of old Rome had been abandoned to be replaced by Oriental despotism, superstition and effeminacy, until the barbarian but vigorous West took over the old empire and gave it new life through Charlemagne, some of whose descendants are among the characters in *Count Robert*. Written at a time of great Western colonial expansion to the East, mainly British and French, the novel implies that the West, here represented by the eponymous hero, the French-Norman Robert of Paris, and the true protagonist of the novel, the Anglo-Saxon Varangian Hereward, must dominate the decaying Byzantine Empire, which Scott often conflates with the Ottoman Empire which succeeded it. In the depiction of Western characters there are various degrees of positive representation, but the Greeks (also called Orientals) are almost all negatively depicted, with one exception: the historian princess Anna Comnena. In her ambivalent and sometimes contradictory portrayal we may perceive, I will argue, Scott's own ambivalence towards the gendered roles prevalent in his day, as well as a reluctant admiration for the female historiographer.

Scott builds the plot around the young protagonist, Hereward, who is a Varangian guard in the service of Alexius Comnenus. Hereward is torn between loyalty to the emperor and chivalric duty towards the Crusaders, with whom he has much more in common than with the Greeks he serves (i.e. his superior officer Achilles Tatius and Emperor Alexius), in spite of the hatred and desire for revenge that he feels for the Normans as an Anglo-Saxon exile. Owing to his courage, strength, and manly beauty, he soon becomes the centre of a number of plots and subplots which involve Alexius, his daughter Princess Anna, her foppish husband Nicephorus Briennius, Count Robert of Paris and his pugnacious wife Countess Brenhilda, a Western former mercenary now a prisoner in the dungeons of Alexius, Italian-Norman Crusaders, and an assortment of Greek characters, most notably a sorcerer-philosopher and an army officer plotting against the emperor. There are even representatives of the 'monstrous races' of ancient and medieval accounts, evoked in the characters of the black slave Diogenes, the Scythian mercenary Toxartes, and Sylvan the orang-utang. According to Ian Duncan, '*Count Robert of Paris* offers fantastic glimpses of a

multiplicity of human developmental forms and paths' (Duncan 2012, 138) in an imaginary Constantinople where 'the boundaries between culture and race, race and species, and human and non-human species shift and blur' (Duncan 2012, 139). If this novel is an exploration of 'universal human nature' (Duncan 2012, 138) in the depiction of its various manifestations and evolutions, as Duncan claims, it is also a novel that explores power in gendered manifestations. These have concrete political implications, by which ultimately the shifting boundaries will settle more or less to the advantage of one 'culture and race' at the expense of the other(s). I argue this hypothesis by focusing on the relationship and dynamics developed between Greeks and Westerners, whose encounters in the novel are framed within a gendered discourse signalling tension, potential violence and ultimately a struggle for domination. In this struggle, each side uses different means and adheres to different codes: the Westerners try to dominate the Greeks with their strength, honour and prowess in war, and the Greeks use deception and cunning to pre-empt Western aggression, which they fear above all else. Hereward is positioned between Count Robert and Alexius, bound by honour to the first and by obligation to the second, and the plot directs him to find a way to balance and if possible bring together those two opposing sides, in true Lukácsian fashion (Lukács 1989, 36). However, he clearly leans towards the Crusaders' cause, even though he will fight in single combat against Count Robert in support of Alexius. The intricacies of these shifting alliances echo the complexities of international politics on the Eastern Question and the involvement of Britain and France in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century, particularly in the matter of Greek independence (1821-1830) which saw these two Great Powers sometimes supporting and sometimes turning against one another or the Ottomans. The very presence of Westerners of various provenances in Constantinople at the time of the First Crusade evokes eighteenth and nineteenth century realities in the Ottoman empire where, 'as [its] decline became manifest and the rivalry over its anticipated remains became intense with France, Russia and England, the Greek lands began to swarm with military, diplomatic and even commercial agents' (Woodhouse 1969, 17).

Brian Hamnett sees *Count Robert* as another contribution to a debate over relationships between East and West, to which Scott returns after *The Talisman* (1825). However, the East of Count Robert is not the East of the Muslim world, but rather a liminal place occupied by the Greeks, 'squeezed between the Franks – the "barbarians" – on the one side, and the Muslims – the "infidels" – on the other' (Hamnett 2011, 97). This East has all the negative connotations of the 'despotic' Orient and none of the redeeming features of courage, gallantry and wisdom that Scott depicted in the heroic portrait of Saladin in *The Talisman*, his 'one unreservedly romantic hero' (Hamnett 2011, 97, 73n). Disparaging views of the Greeks, prominent in the late eleventh- and early twelfth-century Chron-

icles of the First Crusade, were adopted by Torquato Tasso (whom Scott admired greatly: see Brand 1972; Irwin 2014) in his First Crusade epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), and continued in later centuries, when Western European travellers began to visit Greece, which, ‘placed in a twilight zone illuminated neither by the radiance of the West nor by the exotic glow of the East’ (Olga Augustinos in Todorova 2009: 78, 67n) was frankly disappointing. Gibbon’s negative assessment of the medieval Greek world is well-known and so is his influence on Scott. This position is at the heart of Scott’s representation of Greek characters. The one notable exception is Anna Comnena, whose ambivalent portrayal reveals Scott’s benign but ultimately traditionalist stance towards women, as well as his own anxieties about a changing world, in which conventional gender categories were not adequate to render the complexities of reality.

Masculine Westerners, effeminate Greeks, and the dialectics of sexual domination

Joan Wallach Scott has proposed using gender as a way ‘to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction’ as well as to offer insights into ‘the specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics’ (Wallach Scott 1999, 46). It is thus significant that the relationship between the Westerners and Greeks in *Count Robert* is presented as a struggle for domination, framed in gendered terms, which underpin specific political agendas. This has important implications for the terms in which these two worlds meet, since it makes the possibility of mutual recognition or respect problematic. The two parties do not come together as equals but are presented as threatening and threatened respectively; their gendered encounter results in their relationship adopting the character of sexual domination. According to psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, sexual domination is a dialectic relationship of control, in which assertion of the self and respect for the Other are mutually exclusive. Domination implies annihilation of the other: ‘if I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist’ (Benjamin 1984, 295). Using Hegel’s discussion of master-slave relationship, Benjamin sees domination and control as a form of self-identification posited in polemical or confrontational terms. The struggle for domination becomes by definition a struggle for existence. Recognition of the other is impossible, for it is perceived as a threat to one’s own sense of self (Benjamin 1984, 293); identity can only be constituted through the achievement of power over the other. Thus the dominator asserts his power over the Other by aggression, disparagement, and scorn (Benjamin 1984, 299). In *Count Robert* the erotics of sexual domination are pervasive in the perception and depiction of the encounters not only between characters but also between the different worlds and cultures they represent. The tensions and

conflicts between East and West cannot be resolved by mutual acceptance and recognition but by the nexus of domination / subjugation.

The terms of gendered discourse are set in the reader's first encounter with Hereward. Scott makes a point of emphasising his manliness in his introductory description:

His beauty [...] though he was really a handsome young man in features and in person, *was not liable to the charge of effeminacy*. From this it was rescued, both by his *size*, and by the *confident and self-possessed air* with which the youth seemed to regard the wonders around him, not indicating the stupid and helpless gaze of a mind equally inexperienced and incapable of receiving instruction, but expressing the *bold intellect* which at once understands the information which it receives, and commands the spirit to toil in search of the meaning of that which it has not comprehended, or may fear it has misinterpreted. (Scott 1831, 10; emphasis added)

Scott signals clearly Hereward's masculine attributes either explicitly (he is not effeminate) or implicitly with physical, moral, and mental traits that befit a man according to nineteenth-century gender conventions: size, confidence, self-possession, intellectual boldness. Ina Ferris has shown how these attributes (especially self-possession) gained particular importance in Scott's time, when masculinity was being redefined, moving away from violence and towards a more civilised restraint, albeit still active and vigorous (Ferris 1999, 92). Hereward represents this new ideal of masculinity, positioned against both Count Robert, who represents the outdated order of unrestrained violence, and the Greek characters, who are almost effeminate in their cowardice and avoidance of armed conflict at all costs. In this sense, Hereward's character attests to Georg Lukács (Lukács 1989, 49) understanding of Scott's historical fiction as the place where transformations of history become transformations of popular life. Hereward is not only a model of Aristotelian perfection, the mean between deficiency and excess, but also the man who stands neither too low nor too high in the social order and can therefore, as Lukács puts it, 'bring the extremes, whose struggle fills the novel, into contact with one another' (Lukács 1989, 36).

Although Hereward's natural gifts, his physical appearance and his intellectual capabilities are all virile, the world in which he lives and acts tries to force him to adopt effeminate luxury, typical of the 'Orient'. As a member of the emperor's guard, Hereward is required to wear a 'rich, or rather gaudy costume' which 'exhibited a singular mixture of *splendour and effeminacy*' (Scott 1831, 12; emphasis added). In this splendid, effeminate costume Hereward, who is compared to 'youthful Hercules' by an admiring Greek artist (Scott 1831, 15), rather evokes the image of an effeminate Hercules, according to the myth in which Hercules, dressed as a woman, served in the court of an Oriental queen. A tense atmosphere of sexual ambivalence is thus created which foreshadows

Hereward and Anna Comnena's encounter in her palace apartments, where Hereward will be the only real man among the females of the imperial family, the priests, the courtiers, and even the emperor, who is presented, contrary to historical fact, as a non-fighting ruler. As an imperial guard, Hereward must carry arms, but the Greek sword is not impressive: 'A light crooked sword, or scimitar, sheathed in a scabbard of gold and ivory, hung by [his] left side [...] the ornamental hilt of which appeared much too small for the large-jointed hand of the young Hercules who was thus gaily attired' (Scott 1831, 11). The reference to scimitar is particularly striking, as scimitars were Ottoman and not Byzantine; this is one of many instances in which Scott orientalises the medieval Greek empire. This orientalised toy-sword is not the only weapon on Hereward's person: he carries his own Anglo-Saxon battle-axe, 'a weapon which seemed actually adapted to the young barbarian's size, and unfit to be used by a man of less formidable limbs and sinews than his own' (Scott 1831, 11). A potent phallic symbol described in covert sexual terms ('firm staff', 'ponderous size'), the battle-axe signals masculinity and reveals Hereward's true nature beneath the frivolous, effeminate regalia he is obliged to wear. It also sets him apart from the native Greeks who, having 'the mark of civilised people [...] never bore weapons during the time of peace' (Scott 1831, 11). Lacking this symbolic penis, the Greeks are in effect symbolically castrated. The only individual endowed with masculinity at this moment in the novel is the Westerner, whom the native Greeks view 'with some evident show of fear as well as dislike' (Scott 1831, 11). The fear of the Greek characters, from passers-by in the street to the emperor himself, when facing Westerners suggests Anna Comnena's and her father's firm belief, expressed often in *The Alexiad*, that the Crusaders' real aim was not the liberation of the Holy Land, but the conquest of the Byzantine Empire and all its wealth. History, of course, proved that Alexius and Anna's fears were justified: during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Constantinople indeed became the target and fell to the Crusaders, who installed a short-lived Latin kingdom there.

Scott's emphatic focus on Hereward's masculinity and the loving description of this 'ponderously sized' phallic weapon, as well as the contrast between his effeminate clothes and his 'formidable limbs and sinews' imply that Hereward's subaltern position to the Greek emperor is only nominal. The Greeks cannot dominate and tame him with their decadent culture; their cultural artifices are nothing to Hereward's true manly nature, and their weak and small swords (size matters very much in this case) are no match for his enormous hands and battle-axe. With the emphasis on Hereward's weapons, the gendered discourse acquires overtones of sexualised threats of violence. When Hereward hears a Greek slander the Varangians, he expresses his intention to '[cram] the epithet down the speaker's throat with the spike of my battle-axe'. Hereward justifies his violent intention, which implies an act of sexual humiliation, as the only way in which he can preserve his manhood after the insult: 'The lie is to a

man the same as a blow, and a blow degrades him into a slave and a beast of burden, if endured without retaliation' (Scott 2006, 27). For Hereward, the use of physical violence against a slanderer, who is not provoking him with physical violence, is seen to be necessary for his survival as a man of honour. Not using violence would degrade and annihilate him, since in his view his freedom and his very humanity are at stake.

The phallic battle-axe, the signifier which separates the masculine Anglo-Saxon from the feminised Greeks, is a symbolic penis, the 'symbolisation of male mastery' (Benjamin 1984, 299); it is what separates Hereward from the condition of the slave. The weapon-bearing man is the true master in a feminized society. Alexius recognises Hereward's superiority, is aware of the danger, and he tries not to show his fear, on several occasions, of his nominal subaltern. In Benjamin's words, '[t]he penis symbolises the fact that, however interdependent the master and slave become, the master will always maintain the boundary – the rigidity, antagonism, and polarization of their respective parts' (Benjamin 1984, 300). The hierarchical superiority of Hereward, the battle-axe-bearing Westerner, over the unarmed, 'castrated' Greeks of the emperor's court is thus established.

Only in the presence of other Westerners, male or female, is Hereward among equals or with his true superiors, because their valour, honesty and lack of sophisticated over-complication match his own. The mark of equality is the single combat: the locus of the true encounter in the chivalric code, in which only equals in rank can participate. Count Robert initially rejects Hereward's challenge to single combat, since the young man is not his social equal. But later, when Count Robert challenges Nicephorus Briennius, who is under arrest in the palace for conspiring against his father-in-law and is thus unable to fight, he will accept Hereward as an opponent, in spite of Prince Tancred's protestation that the lists 'were only open to knights and nobles'. Hereward the Varangian is, ironically, the only *man* from the Greek side (as the emperor's guard) to accept Count Robert's challenge, and thus save 'the honour of Nicephorus Briennius, and the credit of the empire' (Scott 2006, 345).

This complex of oppositions is echoed in Anna Comnena. She is the only Greek character who can be matched with Westerners: she is the only Greek in the novel to fight in single combat, facing Countess Brenhilda in the lists in the 'damning' episode which so horrified Scott's editorial team,² and she even threatens Hereward's masculinity itself. In their first encounter Hereward is overcome by the power of Anna's narrative. The masculinised balance of power between East and West is reversed in their first encounter, albeit temporarily.

**Hereward and Anna Comnena:
The power of the Female Historiographer**

The historical Anna Comnena (b. 1083, d. 1154?), princess, historiographer, scholar, intellectual and patron of intellectuals in the Comnenean era (described also as the Comnenean Renaissance of the twelfth century), seems to have fascinated Scott (see Kolovou 2016). He even considered naming the novel *Anna Comnena* instead of *Count Robert of Paris*, as he wrote in a letter to Cadell (Alexander 2006, 387). Gibbon, Scott's main source, cited Anna Comnena's work in *Decline and Fall*, but although he praised her judgment and discernment, his overall assessment of her historiography was scathing and arguably misogynistic: 'Yet, instead of the simplicity of style and narrative which wins our belief, an elaborate affectation of rhetoric and science betrays, in every page, the vanity of a female author' (Gibbon 1776, 263). Scott's portrayal of Anna in his novel initially follows Gibbon's assessment, presenting Anna as a vain and affected woman with literary pretensions. This portrayal, however, is inconsistent throughout the novel. Scott's ambivalence towards the historical character is made manifest in his various and conflicting depictions of Anna as literary woman, damsel-in-distress, honest wife, would-be temptress and even reluctant female warrior. Although Anna's writing is today acknowledged to be powerful, depictions of the female author as a figure of vanity and folly and as an object of ridicule were widespread in Scott's own time (see for example Gouma-Peterson 2000, ix; Ljubarski 2000, 168-85; Treadgold 2013, 373-74, 385). Gibbon's disparaging comment echoes a nineteenth-century consensus on the vanity of female writers. Francis Jeffrey, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, made a remark in 1803 that indicates this: 'impatience of honest industry, that presumptuous vanity, and precarious principle, that have [...] drawn so many females from their plain work and their embroidery, to delight the public with their beauty in the streets, and their novels in the circulating library' (Ferris 1991, 29). Early nineteenth-century women authors were 'mocked and ruled out of order' if they ventured into male territory, such as history (Ferris 1991, 52), law, and the classics (Ferris 1991, 85-6). Literary salons and the social activities of literary women, called 'bluestockings' since the time of Mrs Thrale, were another favourite target. As Pam Perkins in her exploration of Scottish women writers notes, 'by the end of the eighteenth century, the intellectual sociability of the bluestockings was a matter for satire and criticism while the word itself was becoming a form of shorthand for all the supposedly more unattractive qualities of literary women' (Perkins 2010, 37).

Although Scott himself was known to support and encourage female writers, it should be noted that this approval of female authorship seems to be limited to women who engage in fiction themed around love, family, relationships, the domestic and the social space which was acceptable for women to inhabit. Above all they should be pleasant in a feminine way. Scott's comment in his journal about the Scottish novelist Susan Ferrier (1782-1854) shows what he

valued, and did not, in a female author: ‘This gifted personage, besides having great talents, has conversation the least exigeante of any author, female least, who I have ever seen among the long list I have encountered, - simple, full of humour, and exceedingly read at repartee; and all this without the least affectation of the blue stocking’ (Monnickendam 2013, 67). The ‘affectation of the blue stocking’ is a negative trait which Scott along with other writers of his era, including many women, deplors in a woman writer. Affectation and pretentiousness are what Scott also sees in Anna Comnena: he makes a point of repeating, following Gibbon, that ‘vainglory’ was the ‘ruling principle’ of her writing and the motive ‘which induced her to affect the character of a historian’ (Scott 1831, 360).

In her first appearance in the novel Anna Comnena is presented as an affected bluestocking who makes her writing something of a public performance (to a captive audience of her parents and their courtiers), in order to gratify her vanity. Her literary salon, ‘the Temple of the Muses’ as it is rather mockingly called by Scott, is a place of unmitigated boredom: her father the emperor is usually half-asleep during her recitations, and the courtiers only put up with it out of necessity. But the greatest victim of Anna’s inflated sense of self-worth as a princess and female intellectual is her husband, Nicephorus Briennius, whose rightful place of superiority in the household as a man is usurped by his wife’s pretensions. This is made manifest in the symbolic positioning of their seats in the salon. Anna sits on an elevated place on a dais, a table before her ‘loaded with books, plants, herbs, and drawings’ displaying her interests and accomplishments. On the same dais another chair, just like hers ‘in size and convenience’ but placed lower, is her husband’s seat. ‘To atone for the lowly fashion of the seat of Nicephorus Briennius, it was placed as near to his princess as it could possibly be edged by the ushers, so that she might not lose one look of her handsome spouse, nor he the least particle of wisdom which might drop from the lips of his erudite consort’ (Scott 1831, 37). This is an inversion of conventional gender roles: Anna sits in a higher position than her husband, and has the traditionally male attributes of erudition and wisdom, while Nicephorus is the ‘handsome spouse’ who is supposed to be hanging on her lips. But Anna’s intellectual superiority is presented as detrimental to domestic happiness:

[Briennius] was said to entertain or affect the greatest respect for his wife’s erudition, though the courtiers were of the opinion he would have liked to absent himself from her evening parties more frequently than was particularly agreeable to the Princess Anna and her imperial parents. This was partly explained by the private tattle of the court, which averred that the Princess Anna Comnena had been more beautiful when she was less learned; and that, though still a fine woman, she had somewhat lost the charms of her person, as she became enriched in her mind. (Scott 1831, 37)

Scott distances his narrative voice from this judgement somewhat by attributing it to gossiping courtiers, yet the idea that a learned woman either loses something of her 'feminine charms' as she gains in knowledge, or that she has devoted herself to learning in the first place because she lacks feminine charms altogether, was quite widespread in Scott's world. The unflattering comments of the courtiers echo Charlotte Smith's portrait of the fictional bluestocking Mrs Manby, whose literary pretensions were the result of 'a vain and deluded pursuit of the sort of admiration she fails to win through any more conventionally feminine means' (Perkins 2010, 38). Although Anna is a beautiful woman, Scott informs us, she is getting on in years and is now twenty-seven years old. In historical fact, Anna Comnena was only thirteen at the time of the First Crusade, and began to write her history in her old age; but neither the girl nor the old woman could be of any use in Scott's historical romance. By sexualising the character of the historian and discussing her in gendered terms, Scott undermines the power of Anna Comnena's intellect, making her the object of vicious gossip because of it.

Soon after Hereward is introduced to the reader, he is summoned to the presence of the emperor at a gathering in the palace, where Anna Comnena entertains (or bores, Scott hints) the imperial court with readings from her work. As Hereward is led inside the labyrinthine palace, he encounters 'another species of inhabitants', the 'withered and deformed beings' who fascinate and horrify in Western accounts of the Orient, the court eunuchs. They are busy in various occupations 'of profound silence' (Scott 1831, 34), and function as a disturbing reminder of what it means to be castrated, foreshadowing the danger Hereward will face in the palace. On entering the part of the palace where Anna's apartments are located, Hereward is asked to relinquish his battle-axe before entering. He refuses, as he will not acquiesce to this symbolic castration, which the rules of an over-civilized, effeminate world and, by inference, the intelligent woman who resides within, want to impose on him. His commanding officer exhorts him to behave properly: 'remember thou dash [the battle-axe] not about according to thy custom, nor bellow, nor shout, nor cry as in a battle-field' (Scott 1831, 36). In other words, Hereward is required to tame his barbarian masculinity and subject it to the rules of this feminised environment. The emphasis on the gendered differences between the sophisticated Greek palace and the young Westerner of untamed virility help to set the scene for the meeting in terms of antithesis and confrontation, and also erotic tension.

When Hereward enters Anna's apartment through the folding doors it is difficult to resist reading this in Freudian terms of sexual penetration, particularly since the same description of the folding doors 'yielding' is used again when Anna's husband enters the room later (Scott 1831, 61). Anna is about to begin a reading. The passage she has chosen gives an account of the (fictional) battle of Laodicea, in which Hereward and the Varangian guard were active participants, and Anna asks Hereward 'to correct any mistake or misapprehension'

(Scott 1831, 45) in the narrative, which he does. Anna's ability to write well about warfare has elicited much praise by modern scholars, as well as doubts that she could have written those passages herself (see Macrides 2000, 63-81). Scott does not seem to harbour such doubts, as in his pastiche of Anna's history he places the princess near the action on the battlefield, where she and her mother accompany her father on his military campaign. Undoubtedly Scott took Anna at her own word: when discussing her sources, Anna clearly states that '[m]ost of the time, moreover, we were ourselves present, for we accompanied my father and mother. My life by no means revolved round the home; we did not live a pampered existence' (Komnene 1148, 421). By showing Anna to be an eye-witness to the events she describes, Scott offers an explanation of her ability to write so vividly on military affairs, which is subtle praise for her writing skills.

Hereward's response to Anna's request, 'boldly and bluntly delivered' (Scott 1831, 45), impresses everyone present and makes one of the courtiers whisper to another "'The northern battle-axe lacks neither point nor edge'" (Scott 1831, 45): in this instance, the battle-axe, sign of Hereward's masculinity, is endowed with intellectual and moral power as well. The battle-axe is not used metonymically for the penis here, but for the tongue, which will not be afraid to speak the truth. A real man is in possession of both a penis and a tongue, as opposed to the eunuchs whom Hereward encountered earlier, who had been stripped of both their manhood and their speech. Anna realises that she has 'invoked the opinion of a severe judge', but also 'that his respect was of a character more real, and his applause, should she gain it, would prove more truly flattering, than the gilded assent of the whole Grecian audience' (Scott 1831, 46). In this way, although Anna is on her own territory, authority derives from Hereward, as he holds the power of verifying or rejecting Anna's historical account. At the same time, Scott hints at Anna's sexual attraction to Hereward:

She gazed with some surprise and attention on Hereward, already described as a very handsome young man, and felt the natural desire to please, which is easily created in the mind towards a fine person of the other sex. His attitude was easy and bold, but neither clownish nor uncourtly. His title of a barbarian, placed him at once free from the forms of civilized life, and the rules of artificial politeness [...] In short, the Princess Anna Comnena, high in rank as she was, [...] felt herself, nevertheless, [...] more anxious to obtain the approbation of this rude soldier, than that of all the rest of the courteous audience. [...] she had now a judge of a new character, whose applause, if given, must have something in it intrinsically real, since it could only be obtained by affecting his head or his heart. (Scott 1831, 46)

Hereward's barbarian origin, often cited in this chapter, adds attraction to his physical and mental virtues, since it places him outside social constraints and

therefore hints at unrestrained sexuality, evoking the fascination for the barbarian which is a topos of invasion and domination in historical romance, particularly in the combination ‘barbarian warrior – civilized princess’. From Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô* to present-day commercial historical fiction, as a brief survey of the Mills and Boon historical romance list reveals,³ the barbarian functions as an unbridled symbol of masculinity who, not bound by social conventions and manners himself, will help the heroine to liberate herself from socially imposed restrictions and experience passion and pleasure by submitting to his sexuality.

The sexual frisson between Ann and Hereward intensifies as the evening progresses. Anna is intrigued by the young Varangian and he is not indifferent to her.

Anna was, or had very lately been, a beauty of the very first rank, and must be still supposed to have retained charms to captivate a barbarian of the north; if, indeed, he himself was not careful to maintain an heedful recollection of the immeasurable distance between them. Indeed, even this might hardly have saved Hereward from the charms of this enchantress, bold, free-born, and fearless as he was. (Scott 1831, 47)

In medieval chivalric romance young knights were often involved in adulterous affairs with married women. But the nineteenth-century paradigm of masculinity and romance had shifted, as we have seen, to one of self-restraint and prudence. Hereward is no Tristan or Lancelot to fall in love with Anna: she is the daughter of the emperor and wife of a noble prince, and ‘reason and duty alike forbade him to think of [her] in any other capacity’ (Scott 1831, 47). This wavering between attraction and resistance which characterises interactions between Anna and Hereward could be seen to reflect Scott’s own ambivalence: attraction to the female historian’s narrative power contrasted to his inability to think of her in any other capacity than as a vain female writer, and his refusal to recognise her authority as a writer of history due to her sex.

Although Hereward will not surrender to the charm of the woman, he will succumb to the influence of her writing. Once Anna begins to read, her historical account gradually asserts its power over him mentally and physically. Even though he resists at first and finds Anna’s inordinate praise for her father or for other Greek leaders in the war ridiculous, listening with ‘a smile of suppressed contempt’, he is drawn into the story once Anna begins to write about the battle itself:

He lost the rigid and constrained look of a soldier, who listened to the history of his Emperor with the same feelings with which he would have mounted guard at his palace. His colour began to come and go; his eyes to fill and to sparkle; his limbs to become more agitated than their owner seemed to assent to; and his whole appearance was changed into that of

a listener, highly interested by the recitation which he hears, and insensible, or forgetful, of whatever else was passing before him. (Scott 1831, 55-6)

As the narrative moves towards an event which concerns Hereward personally – the description of his own brother’s death on the battlefield - Anna’s previously stated desire to affect his heart is fulfilled:

As the historian proceeded, Hereward became less able to conceal his agitation; and at the moment the Princess looked round, his feelings became so acute, that, forgetting where he was, he dropped his ponderous axe upon the floor, and, clasping his hands together, exclaimed, — “My unfortunate brother!” (Scott 1831, 56)

Anna’s narrative so completely captivates Hereward that he drops ‘his ponderous axe’, temporarily losing his masculinity owing to the power exercised on him by the female author. Anna’s powerful narrative disarms and unmans him. Her domination over him is made manifest beyond doubt, although she does not boast of her conquest openly: ‘The Princess said nothing, but was evidently struck and affected, and not ill-pleased, perhaps, at having given rise to feelings of interest so flattering to her as an authoress’ (Scott 1831, 56). The scene reaches its climax in the gift of a ring which Anna bestows on Hereward as a token of her appreciation for his and his brother’s services to her father, which he presses to his lips (Scott 1831, 57). The scene of sexual conquest is sealed with a symbolic marriage, as befits a happy-ending romance.

But this state of affairs cannot last. Nicephorus Briennius, Anna’s husband, enters the room, bringing news of the coming crusaders, among whom there are many Normans, Hereward’s old enemies. The climate shifts back to factual, not narrated war, which brings Hereward back to his senses. Even though he was so publicly and obviously affected by Anna’s writing earlier, when he leaves the palace he acts as if a spell was broken. ‘Looking back at the mass of turrets, battlements, and spires, out of which they had at length emerged, Hereward could not but feel his heart lighten [...] He sighed and rubbed his hands with pleasure, like a man newly restored to liberty’ (Scott 1831, 75).

Now that Hereward has removed himself from the influence of the compelling storyteller, he feels free to disavow her. He talks disparagingly of Anna’s history as ‘the prolix chat of a lady, who has written about she knows not what’ and asserts that the knowledge he gained during that meeting, ‘that the Normans are come hither to afford us full revenge of the bloody day of Hastings’, was his ‘recompense’ for the tedious task of listening to her (Scott 1831, 75). By returning to the world of blood, revenge and battle, Hereward will make amends for his temporary lapse from his masculine performance and the ‘fall’ into a feminine position of displaying emotion and being overpowered by a woman’s narrative.

Hereward will also reaffirm his virility and dominance in the sexual field. As he and his superior officer walk away from the palace, he is reprimanded for ‘the somewhat overbold licence which thou tookest in thy gaze upon the Princess’. Hereward’s answer is charged with sexual entitlement: ““So be it, in the name of Heaven”, replied Hereward. “Handsome faces were made to look upon, and the eyes of young man to see with”” (Scott 1831, 76). Anna is divested from her authorial power and is now demoted to a mere pretty face; her intellectual gifts give way to her physical, feminine charms. Hereward’s gaze reduces her to an object existing for his visual pleasure. He further objectifies Anna when he declares that he will fight anyone who ‘dares detract from the beauty of the imperial Anna Comnena’s person, or from the virtues of her mind’ – the latter does not imply her intellectual strength, it is only conventional praise reserved for ladies. The man who was overpowered by Anna’s narrative only a short time before, now claims that he cannot ‘presume to form a judgement’ about her history, for he does not understand it. He will judge her only for her beauty and for singing ‘like an angel’ (Scott 1831, 76). Anna is reduced to a decorative female whose presence and pleasing arts of singing (and perhaps some story-writing) would be acceptable, but pretensions to anything more intellectual dismissed as ‘prattle’. Thus Hereward reasserts his masculine prerogative of defending powerless women, and re-establishes his dominant position, which was imperilled by the intellectual authority of the female historiographer. No wonder he feels he has escaped a sort of death, and is now free when he leaves the palace: ““Me-thinks the air of yonder vaults [...] carries with it a perfume, which, though it may be well termed sweet, is so suffocating, as to be more suitable to sepulchrous chambers, than to the dwellings of men. Happy I am to be free, as I trust, from its influences”” (Scott 1831, 75)

Hereward’s renouncement of Anna’s power, viewed within the framework of the politics of sexual domination, reveals his fear of castration and consequent loss of power and submission. We saw earlier in the discussion of effeminate Greeks and virile Westerners how domination excludes equality and is confrontational by definition. The same principle is at work here. In the meeting between Hereward and Anna, it is made clear that although the effeminate Greeks accept being subordinate to women, as Nicephorus Briennius accepts Anna, the virile Westerners will not. Hereward will avoid Briennius’s humiliation, or the terrible fate of the eunuchs, by renouncing Anna’s power over him. According to thirteenth-century Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates, it is exactly this inversion of gender roles that brought on the ruin of the empire. Choniates, who admired Anna Comnena’s wide education ‘in philosophy and all sciences’ (Choniates 15.9-10), presents her as a conspirator who tried to usurp the throne from the rightful heir, her brother John Comnenus, but the conspiracy failed largely due to Briennius’s hesitation. Choniates disapproves of both what he saw as Anna’s overbearing ambition, and her husband’s passive and sluggish manner. He even shows Anna deplore the fact that it was Briennius to whom

nature gave a penis, whereas she only got a ‘cleft’ (Choniates 15.19-23). As Leonora Neville points out, Choniates tried to explain the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 by blaming the policy of previous emperors, and in particular Alexius Comnenus, ‘portraying [his] court as a locus of gender inversion and unnatural power relations’ (Neville 2012, 22). Hereward recoils with horror at the possibility of being dominated by a woman, not only as a man but as a Westerner who cannot accept defeat and subjugation, and rejects such ‘unnatural power relations’, recognising their disastrous results on Greek men.

Most Western chronicles of the crusades, and in particular the First Crusade, repeatedly speak of ‘effeminate Greeks’ and, like Gibbon after them, praise the Turks’ strength and vigour in war, in antithetical terms. The idea of Greek effeminacy must connect to the fact that the Greeks were weaker in armed conflict, losing most of Asia Minor to the Seljuk Turks, with the humiliating defeat of Manzikert in 1071 sealing their losses. Additionally, in the view of the West, Alexius Comnenus had betrayed the First Crusade by not participating in it personally with his army (Frankopan 2012, 193). Byzantium’s contribution to the Crusade in the logistics and maintenance for the Western armies is ignored. As Matthew Bennett puts it, ‘logistics never had much appeal as symbolic of masculine virtue, despite their essential nature. [...] The Greeks are judged solely on their ‘half-century of defeats which they had suffered at the hands of the Turks’ (Bennett 2002, 16-30). Masculinity is measured by a strong record of victorious wars and defeat is a mark of effeminacy, as it places the body of the vanquished man under the control of the victor, on a par with the female body whose ‘natural’ place is to be dominated. In Benjamin’s theory on the erotics of sexual domination, masculinity is precisely defined in oppositional terms to this type of ‘feminine’, nurturing function, since masculine identity is formed via rejecting and objectifying the feminine (Benjamin 1984, 304-5).

In view of this definition of masculinity, it is hardly surprising that the Byzantines’ vital help to the Crusaders in terms of food and equipment was not valued and they were not viewed as true allies and equals: it was the very nature of their contribution that proved their effeminacy. In the same way that ‘[m]ale hegemony in the culture is expressed by the generalization of rationality and the exclusion of nurturance, the triumph of individualistic, instrumental values in all forms of social interaction’ (Benjamin 1984, 306), the rejection of nurture over violent domination in battle constitutes the hierarchy of values which privileges virile Westerners and demotes Byzantines to the position of feminine submission.

The many faces of Anna Comnena: damsel-in-distress, female warrior

In her second encounter with Hereward, Anna is fleeing from a dungeon, where her father keeps Ursel, an old former mercenary who had rebelled against his ‘tyranny’. Alexius has concocted an evil plan to make Anna divorce her husband

and marry Ursel instead. The young woman, terrified, flees and seeks Hereward's protection from her father's wicked designs.

"Dearest Hereward," said the lady [...] The alarm of the Princess, the familiarity of a beautiful woman, who, while in mortal fear, seeks refuge, like a frightened dove, in the bosom of the strong and the brave, must be the excuse of Anna Comnena for the tender epithet with which she greeted Hereward. [...] Exhausted as she was, she suffered herself to repose upon the broad breast and nervous shoulder of the Anglo-Saxon; nor did she make an attempt to recover herself, although the decorum of her sex and station seemed to recommend such an exertion. (Scott 2006, 277)

But Hereward does make an attempt and 'with the unimpassioned and reverential demeanour of a private soldier to a Princess' asks her 'whether he ought to summon her female attendants'. Anna reads this as a rejection, as her reaction shows:

"Do as thou wilt, barbarian", said the Princess, rallying herself, with a certain degree of pique, arising perhaps from her not thinking more *dramatis personae* were appropriate to the scene, that the two that were already upon the stage. (Scott 2006, 278)

Hereward realizes he has offended her somehow but cannot know why and does not 'presume to guess', and after handing Anna over to her attendants, goes back to duty, 'with the never-failing double-edged axe, the bane of many a Turk, glittering upon his shoulder' (Scott 2006, 279). His masculinity will never be in danger from Anna's seductions again. He resumes the chivalric role of the strong man who must save the weak woman, not only from her enemies but from herself as well. As a result, Anna may be a little piqued at first, but their final parting is not unfriendly: 'The obeisance which she made Hereward at parting, had something in it of haughtiness, yet evidently qualified by a look of friendship and regard' (Scott 2006, 279). She understands his prudence in rejecting what might be construed as her advances on him, or at least his not taking advantage of her temporary weakness. He is honourable and he has helped Anna to be honourable (she is married, let us remember) and to control her urges. She submits to his wisdom and returns to the world of female attendants and enclosed apartments, a perfect representation of the submissive, seductive feminine Orient. He goes on, the knight-errant, to subject the Turks to 'his glittering battle-axe', the apt embodiment of the dominant West. The female historiographer has accepted her subaltern position vis-à-vis the male hero, and the 'order of things', temporarily disturbed, is now restored.

However, Anna will not submit to this order of things, decided by others for her, for much longer. After the scene in the dungeons, and having benefited from Hereward's subtle nudging towards virtue, she decides that she must be a true wife and help her husband, who has fallen into disgrace. Owing to Anna

and her mother's joint intervention to the emperor, Briennius is finally pardoned for conspiring against Alexius. Once the son-in-law is absolved and restored to his office and position, Anna's father sends her off to the female apartments to see to her husband's needs. But Anna has had enough, and begins to nurse unexpected ideas. In a passage which at times evokes protofeminist literature, Anna decides that she wants to take her fate into her own hands:

She became sensible that a woman of her extraordinary attainments, who had been by an universal course of flattery disposed to entertain an extraordinary opinion of her own consequence, made rather a poor figure when she had been the passive subject of a long series of intrigues, by which she was destined to be disposed of in one way or the other, according to the humour of a set of subordinate conspirators, who never so much as dreamed of regarding her as a being capable of forming a wish in her own behalf, or even yielding or refusing a consent. (Scott 2006, 323)

Anna does not dispute her father's authority and right to dispose of her so much, Scott goes on to say, as the fact that she, 'an authoress, a giver of immortality' has been used as a political pawn 'without her own consent'. Trying to find a way 'to obtain her chief desire, an illustrious station in history' (Scott 2006, 324), she comes up with the plan to replace her husband in the single combat in which he was challenged not by Count Robert, but by Robert's wife, Countess Brenhilda. Anna follows up on her plan at once, although not without qualms, as Brenhilda is a renowned female warrior. Vacillating 'between pride, or rather vanity [...] and the strong impulse of mortal fear', Anna eventually dons a 'war-like guise', 'a sample of those worn in western Europe by such amazons as Brenhilda' (Scott 2006, 325) and goes out to the lists in disguise (here Scott repeats the trope of the royal figure enlisting in the tournament in disguise which he employed in *Ivanhoe*). Anna's attempt to rise from her subordinate position into a state of self-determination is symbolically effected through her adoption of Western clothes and the Western ritual of single combat. Anna's resolution wavers many times; additionally, Brenhilda scorns her as a 'so contemptible a combatant' (Scott 2006, 337). But eventually Anna goes in, and fights - and against all hope and all probability, wins: as Brenhilda was about to strike Anna with a terrible blow, she 'stumbled and fell, without rising again' (Scott 2006, 341). Vexhelia, an old midwife, intervenes to explain to Anna that the Countess has fallen 'because she suffers under the heavy consequence of that primeval curse which was laid upon woman after the fall.' Anna orders that Brenhilda is looked after, in her delicate condition, 'as if she herself had been born in the purple' (Scott 2006, 342), to general applause from the audience.

What to make of this bizarre episode? Scott himself states that his purpose was 'to have produced some comedy' bringing together in this unusual way the amazonian Brenhilda (inspired, as he clarifies, by the historical figure of the

Italian-Norman Gaeta, wife of Robert Guiscard, whom Anna Comnena mentions with admiration in *The Alexiad*), and the high-spirited and proud Anna Comnena (Scott 2006, 364). For Scott, Anna's attempt to seize arms and thus attain glory is on a par with her attempt at historiography:

That Anna Comnena should have caught the flame [of distinguishing herself in chivalry] is in no way inconsistent with the vainglory which induced her to affect the character of a historian, and by those who read her history with attention, it may be observed to be the ruling principle on which it has been written. (Scott 2006, 360)

Although Scott emphasises repeatedly Anna's vanity, following Gibbon, and considers her writing of history a pretension, we can detect some sympathy, and even compassion in his presentation of Anna, for example when she is trying to break free of her father's tyrannical power and to 'assert her dignity' (Scott 2006, 324). Moreover, the fact that Anna among all the Greek characters is the only one to overpower Western characters twice (the first time by narrating war, the second by performing it), even if her victories are ambivalent and transitory, cannot be incidental. In the final chapter of *Count Robert*, in which the author informs the reader of the fates of all the main characters, Scott abandons the fanciful constructions of Anna's fictional character and allows the historical Anna to speak for herself, quoting largely from *The Alexiad* (Scott 2006, 356-8). Anna has the last word on her own life and times, so to speak. Scott finishes his account of his historical characters, before proceeding to the fictional ones, with the ambivalent comment: 'These quotations [from *The Alexiad*] will probably give the readers as much as they wish to know of the real character of the Imperial historian' (Scott 2006, 359). Scott reserves his own judgment, or perhaps he is not quite sure what to make of Anna Comnena, given that for the length of the novel he has presented her in a variety of ways, none of which can be said to be definitive. The ambivalent, conflicting character of the fictional Anna Comnena could possibly be seen, as Lincoln says in his discussion of Scott's historical romances and their contradictions, 'as a precursor, a complex response to uncertain times' (Lincoln 2007, 220).

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- 1 Although the most recent convention in Byzantine studies is to use the Greek form of names, i.e. Anna Komnene, Alexios Komnenos, Nikephoros Bryennios, John Komnenos, I am using the Latin versions in this paper, in accordance to Sir Walter Scott's own practice.
- 2 Cadell's diary and letters offer a detailed account of his and Ballantyne's disapproval of the 'pregnant combat', in which Scott initially planned to set Brenhilda against Nicephorus Briennius but then replaced the latter by the 'capricious Anna Comnena, which hardly improved matters in [Cadell and Ballantyne's] eyes' (Alexander 2006, 398). In Cadell's own words, the episode 'cast a gloom over me which I cannot get rid of', 'it will injure all your work', 'It will chagrin and disappoint you', 'it is the incidents that are damning', 'a great fault', 'a great blot', 'I look to certain shipwreck if *it* remains as it is now' (in Alexander 2006, 398; the emphasis is Cadell's).
- 3 Some titles gleaned from the Mills and Boon website are indicative: *Bound to the Barbarian*; *Chained to the Barbarian*; *Tamed by the Barbarian*; *Betrothed to the Barbarian*; *the Barbarian's Bride*. <https://www.millsandboon.co.uk/search.aspx?searchText=barbarian>. Accessed January 17, 2016.