‘Wily women of God’ in Breifne’s late medieval and early modern devotional collections

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There are three manuscript collections of the late medieval and early modern periods with important connections to Breifne/Cavan which are particularly worthy of attention. These are BL Egerton MS 1787 (1484–7), Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson B. 573 (last quarter of the fifteenth century) and BL Egerton MS 156 (1650). These compilations are characterized by material of a devotional, didactic and hagiographical nature as well as some medieval romances. There is a degree of overlap between the material found in these collections and, furthermore, this material bears many similarities to a devotional collection commissioned by a Donegal noblewoman, Máire Ní Mhíaille, (d. 1522), wife of Ruaithri Mac Suibhne Fanad, in what became known as the ‘Book of Piey’, which was completed in 1513 and which forms part of the larger Leabhar Chláraine Suíbhne. We know far more about the life of Máire Ní Mhíaille than we do about those for whom the other three collections were compiled. There is a sense, then, in which the identification of a devotee ‘puta flesh’ on devotional material, allowing us to imagine how certain tales might have been heard, prayed, prayed, etc. This marks Máire Ní Mhíaille’s ‘Book of Piey’ as quite unique in that regard; nevertheless, the above-mentioned collections were pass to different owners and readers over time and their contents also provide important evidence of the devotional world to which these owners, their families and, undoubtedly, their wider communities, were exposed.

Firstly, a word about the collections themselves. Egerton MS 1787 was written by members of the Mac Parrthailín family, well-known scribes and dependants of the Mag Shamhradháin, lords of Tullyhaw in modern-day Cavan. Present in the manuscript was compiled (most likely by Conall Bacaich Mac Parrthailín) in the house of Niall Ó Siaghal in Linn Elna, a location Brian Ó Cúiv identifies as Lynally in the barony of Ballycowan in Offaly, and the other part (by Diamuid Bacaich Mac Parrthailín) in two locations – at Derrycaean Lake, adjoining Ballymagurran Lake, and also at Mogue’s Island in nearby Templeport. This man-

1 RIA MS 475 (14 P. 152) for a discussion of some of the contents of the ‘Book of Piey’ see Ryan, ‘Windows on late medieval devotional practice: Máire Ní Mhíaille’s “Book of Piey” (1519) and the world behind the text’. There is a scribal note of Diamuid Bacaich Mac Parrthailín in this case at fo. 128. See Flower, Catalogue of Irish manuscripts, ii, pp 555, 541, O’Cuív, Catalogue of Irish manuscripts, 1, p. 256.
noblewoman Máirs Ní Mháille, particular attention is paid to the role of women in the tales examined.

An Irish version of the Fiérebras legend found in Egerton MS 1781 and additional manuscripts recounts Charlemagne’s conflict with the Saracens, especially the Saracen king Adramis and his son, the giant Firthbras (Fiérebras). This chivalric romance, featuring the well-known characters Roland and Oliver, has parallels with a thirteenth-century French poem ‘Fiérebras’, which was rendered in its Middle English version as ‘Sir Fiarius’ (late fourteenth century). In all three manuscripts, Liber Flavis Fergusiornum, Egerton MS 1781 and Leabhar Chliainne Subhne, the tale follows directly from the legend of the finding of the true cross by St Helena. What Whitley Stokes calls ‘Stair Firthbrisse’ constitutes an Irish translation of a Latin text found in TCD MS 667, a Franciscan manuscript written c.1435 and most probably associated with the friary at Ennis, Co. Clare. Many elements of this rather protracted tale provide important insights into the kind of material wealthy Irish patrons considered worth investing in.

The story begins with the raiding of Rome by the Saracens, the killing of the pope and the theft of the crown of thorns, the nails of the true cross and the relics of the saints from the city. These passion relics were, of course, highly prized in the later middle ages, as the ubiquity of their appearance in the arma Christi or ‘Instruments of the Passion’ in late medieval art and devotional literature demonstrates. The task of recovering the precious relics is entrusted to the emperor Charlemagne and his knights and thus a series of adventures begins. The tenor of the tale is replete with medieval religious concerns. Firstly, there is the theme of the relationship between Christianity and Islam. The giant Firthbras, who guards the tower where the relics are now held, sneeringly boasts to Oliver that it was he who stole the crown of Christ and the relics of the saints and ‘enslaved the city of Helena where your God was buried’. Oliver, meanwhile, claims that he was sent by Charlemagne to exhort the giant to receive baptism and come to the faith of Christ or face death. Oliver reminds the giant that ‘it is right to slay everyone who deserts Almighty God and believes in the idle deities.’ It was common for chivalric accounts of Christian–Saracen conflicts to display little understanding of Islam, the Saracens being believed to worship a pantheon of different gods and, above all, to worship Muhammad. Throughout this tale, the Saracens are depicted as calling on Mahomet as their God and the fact that they

worship him is explicitly referred to. Fortibras is portrayed as refusing blandly to 'forake my own God, even, Mahomet'. Indeed, when Oliver defeats the giant, has him baptized and enlists him to help Charlemagne, Fortibras' father Admirandus is incensed, lamenting 'O Mahomet, who art my God, what is it that brought my son to be overthrown ... and sad it is that he was not killed before he was made a Christian'. Interestingly, however, before Fortibras is defeated by Oliver and becomes a Christian, he displays some confidence in what might be regarded as a passion relic, namely balsam that was applied to the dead body of Christ in the sepulchre. Spying some blood dripping from underneath Oliver's breastplate, Fortibras is reluctant, for reasons of honour, to proceed with the fight. He tells Oliver, 'Now I have two flasks of the balsam which was rubbed on Christ in the sepulchre, and which I found when I destroyed Rome, and no matter how little thereof a man shall consume he will be whole'.

This curious expression of faith by a Muslim in a Christian passion relic underlines the potency which such relics were thought to possess.

However, it could be argued that the true hero of this tale is neither Oliver nor Charlemagne but, instead, Fortibras' sister, Floripas. When their father, Admirandus, succeeds in capturing Oliver and his companions, Floripas manages to enter the jail where they were being held by striking the jailer 'on the crown of his head and dash[ing] out his brains'. Floripas makes a deal with the Christians and proceeds to lead them to safety. Where, en route, her governance recognizes the captives and begins to remonstrate with Floripas, threatening to tell her father, Floripas takes the woman by the calves and casts her out a nearby window into the sea. Floripas' chamber is described in Edenic terms; we are told that an apple grew there that could heal all their ailments. She proceeds to act almost as an Eve-like figure to the wounded Oliver (except with very different consequences) for she 'went into the garden for an apple and gave it to Oliver and as soon as he tasted it he was healed'. Such a parallel with the story of the fall in Genesis would not have been lost on a medieval audience.

In a series of episodes of ingenuity and quick-wittedness, Floripas manoeuvres her father and his forces and time and again, rescuing the Christian knights at every turn: extinguishing fires, removing the pangs of hunger from knights by means of a miraculous girdle and threatening to break the 'ill-coloured teeth' of any jailer who dares to confront her. When the tower which Roland and his Christian knights had conquered and where the relics were held, was about to be re-taken by the Saracens, it was Floripas who remained at the forefront of the Christian defence, opening the coffer where the relics of the saints were lying and bringing them up the tower with her, whereupon the knights prostrated them-

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18 Ibid., 259. 19 Ibid., 267. 20 For the wider context see Houssaye, Pious Pilate, anti-Semitism and the Passion in medieval art. Many saints' lives from the Legenda Aurea are to be found in medieval Irish manuscripts, demonstrating how well-known Voragine's anthology was in Ireland.
emperor suggesting that the problem lies with the seamless garment which Pilate wears and which is warring off Tiberius’ anger that the matter is resolved. Only when Pilate is induced to remove the garment is Tiberius enabled to sentence him to execution. Before the sentence is carried out, however, Pilate takes his own life. His body is thrown into the Tiber but then causes storms, demons to rise up on the river and is subsequently sent to Vienne in France (Via Gebennae) and dumped in the Rhone.12

Once again, it is the truthfulness and virtue of a woman, Veronica, who, in the minds of the medieval constructors of the account, helps Pilate to receive his just desserts. Once again, passion relics feature prominently; in the previous tale Floripas succeeds in the recovery of passion relics from the Saracens, but also uses the relics as powerful weapons when required to repel the foes of the Christian knights. In the Pilate legend, the Vera Icon or true image of Christ’s face on Veronica’s towel has healing properties just as the balsam applied to Christ’s dead body was reputed to have healing properties in the previous tale, even in the words of the Saracen giant Fortibras. In the Pilate legend, the curious incident in which Christ’s seamless garment protects the obvious malefactor in the story from what is portrayed as the just anger of Tiberius, is of some interest. As not only a passion relic, but also a regular feature of the set of passion symbols known as the arma Christi, the performance of the garment in this matter is not altogether untypical. The arma Christi or ‘Instruments of the Passion’ were routinely invoked in medieval spirituality for protection against the judgment of God in much the same way as the blood of the five wounds of Christ were. In this way, they came to function as what might be referred to as ‘weapons of mass redemption’. There are numerous examples of medieval Gaelic Irish bardic poets referring to the instruments in this manner and their frequent inclusion on medieval tomb surrounds along with other intercessors, such as the Virgin and the twelve apostles, further underlines this perceived role.13

There is a further element regarding the seamless garment, moreover, which is worthy of note: the version of the tale found in MS Rawlinson B. 513 emphasizes that this is the garment which was made for Christ by his mother. It is, therefore, quite literally ‘Mary’s garment’. This element is not recorded in the version found in the Legenda Aurea. It is significant that the ‘sinners’ Pilate wears the ‘garment of Mary’ and is thus preserved from punishment, for that was just how the Virgin Mary’s intercession was understood to work in the later middle ages. Mary was the intercessor par excellence for all manner of rogues and sinners and was routinely involed as protector when all else failed. An unabridged bardic religious poem to the Virgin entitled Chl nach catheara chl Maire, found in the Book of O’Conor Don (c.1635), concisely captures how the Virgin was perceived to weigh in on the side of the sinner and subvert: the coarse of divine justice in the phrase ‘she lays waste God’s wrath’.14 The bardic poet Mathghamhain O hUiginn, who composed the poem Ar ghaisn eifhir unaidBreifnich for Niall, son of Tomas Mag Shaimhiradhain of Tulyhaw some time in the mid-fourteenth century, also believed that his hope of salvation lay with Mary on Judgment Day: ‘will profit me on the Monday of the Souls that I have kept close to her, that shapely-cheeked maid’.15 The Pilate story as presented in MS Rawlinson B. 513, therefore, tells us something indirectly of devotion to the Virgin Mary and recourse to her advocacy in medieval Breifnich.

The intervention of the Virgin in time of crisis also features in a tale found in BL Egerton 136, which was completed in 1630 and owned by Cormac Mac Partraidh. This tale, commonly known as The Jew of Bourges’, is also found in the Donegal ‘Book of Piety’ of Máire Ní Mháille and has a long history going back to thirteenth-century exempla collections of figures such as Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. 1240), Étienne de Bourbon (d. 1267) and Étienne de Besanson (d. 1294). The story also appears in Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique MS 20978–9, which dates from 1616–18 and is most likely of Donegal provenance.16 The details of the story are as follows: there was once a gentle and virtuous Jewish boy who had many Christian friends, some of whom invited him to enter a church dedicated to Mary with them and to take communion there, which the Jewish boy duly did. They also show the boy a statue of the Madonna and Child in the church. On arriving home that evening, the boy told his father where he had been. His father, who was a baker, was heating up an oven at the time and, upon hearing his son’s words, flew into a rage, grabbing the boy and placing him in the oven. His mother, seeing what the father had done, ran from the house screaming and wailing. Some Christians ran to help the woman; they entered the house and quenched the oven fire. However, to their amazement, they found the boy sitting happily and unperturbed on the hot coals as if on a bed of flowers. In some versions, the Christians remove the boy and place the father inside instead. The boy proceeds to explain to the still startled Christians that the woman who was in the church with the child while he was eating the bread had covered him with her mantle and thus he was unfarmed. Thereupon the child, his mother and many

other Jews were converted. Here, once again, the protective function of a mantle associated with the Virgin Mary can be discerned.

Two of the Breifne manuscripts (Egerton MS 1781 and Egerton MS 136) include an Irish translation of a Latin life of the early martyr, St Juliana of Nicomedia, a version of which is also found in the Liber Hocvs Fergusoniun. This life was, of course, included in the *Legenda Aurea* which, as noted above, was well-known in medieval Ireland. This is the story of a young African Christian who is beheaded at the prefect of Nicomedia, but refuses to become his wife unless the prefect accepts the Christian faith. Her father, scandalized by her refusal of the prefect, has her stripped and beated. Juliana tells the emperor that if he adores her God she will agree to marry him; however, her father expresses fear of the emperor to which Juliana replies: “If you are so afraid of a mortal emperor, how can you expect me not to fear an immortal one?” Juliana is imprisoned and hung up by the hair of her head. She is given the opportunity to be released if she will only make sacrifice to Apollo and Diana; however, she refuses. Juliana is visited by a demon in disguise while in prison who attempts to change her mind; however, she resists the temptation and, having definitively overcome it, begins to interrogate and intimidate the demon himself, demanding to know his name. As Juliana’s confidence grows, she ties the demon’s hands behind his back, throws him to the ground and begins to violently thrash him with his chains, resulting in the demon’s piteous cry for help: “By Christ crucified, let me go!” Orders are given for Juliana to be released from prison and she leaves the jail, dragging the demon along after her, finally depositing him in a sewer. Juliana is subjected to multiple tortures, including the breaking of her bones on a wheel; however, an angel intervenes to destroy the objects of torture. The onlookers are impressed by this and profess belief in the Christian God after which they are reported to the emperor with the result that one hundred and thirty of them are beheaded. Juliana is then placed in a bath of molten lead which quickly cooks and, enraged, the prefect tears his clothes and curses god for having allowed him to be thwarted once again. Juliana is eventually beheaded and her soul goes to Heaven. As for the prefect, he and thirty-three companions are shortly afterwards drowned at sea, their bodies cast ashore to be devoured by the wild birds.

More well-known early Christian female martyrs such as St Catherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch, whose cults were quite strong in medieval Ireland, feature in Egerton MS 1781, also appearing in Mairi Ni Mhaille’s collection.

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This page contains a discussion on the martyrdom of St Juliana of Nicomedia. It highlights the protective function of the Virgin Mary's mantle, the story of Juliana's interaction with the emperor and the angelic intervention that saved her from execution. The text also touches on the influence of such narratives in medieval Irish manuscripts, emphasizing the importance of female saints in the religious and cultural context of the time. The reference to Mairi Ni Mhaille’s collection suggests a connection to the devotional practices of the period. 

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that the parchment roll on which this prayer is written may well have been wrapped around women in childbirth as a 'birth girdle'. It contains eight promises for those who carry it with them or look upon it, the eighth being the following:

If a woman in childbirth lays this on her womb the child shall be baptised and the mother shall have the service of purification, since St [Quiricus] and St Julitta, his mother, desired these gracious gifts of God, which he granted to them, and this is recorded at Rome.

[Latin] Hail O Quiricus, with the blessed Julitta, glory of children, soldier of the king of angels. Christ and Mary, save us at the hour of our death. Amen.\(^{42}\)

It appears that the cults of Quiricus and Julitta enjoyed some popularity in Cornwall, with church dedications at Luxulyan, Veen and Calstock in addition to Tickenham in Bristol and Swaffham Prior in Cambridgeshire.\(^{43}\)

Closely one of the most popular lives, as evidenced in the appendix of manuscripts provided, was that of St Alexius, which is found in the Liber Flavus, Egerton MS 1781, Leabhar Chailleine Suibhne, Additional MS 30512 and Egerton MS 136. Alexius was the son of a Roman king who initially forsook having children out of a desire to preserve his virginity and would have continued that way were it not for the persuasion of his council who quietly told him that the royal line would die out if he did not do something about it. The son he eventually produced was a good and pious boy named Alexius, who, persuaded to take a wife, clearly inherited some of his father's aspirations. When the marriage feast was over and the newly-married couple were in their chamber, Alexius proceeded to suggest that they both retain their virginity for the Lord. He then gave his bride a ring (in a later Irish version\(^{44}\) he breaks the ring in half; one half she was to keep and the other he. Alexius announced that, upon his death, the other half would come to her – a rather cheerful conversation, given the occasion). He then rose, turned his back on his wife and departed. He proceeded to board a ship and to don the garments of a poor man, finding devotees of Christ in whatever port he arrived at. Although a search party was issued for Alexius the following day, he was already far gone and did not return for seventeen years. Once again, the female characters in the story exhibit a considerable degree of fortitude and forbearance. Alexius' mother vowed that she would clothe herself in penitential garb and remain in her court without music, company, drink, pleasure or entertainment but, instead,

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in Egerton MS 1781 which tells of the abbot of Drimmagh who was transformed into a woman, subsequently bearing seven children, before becoming a man again, await fuller examination. What is clear, however, is that in order to understand more fully these manuscript collections and the raison d'être behind their inclusions, tales such as these must be engaged with in more depth and placed in a broader context. In acknowledging the major contribution of figures such as Gearóid Mac Niocaill and many others in the past in bringing this material to a broader audience, it should be noted that many of the versions found in the Breifne manuscripts and elsewhere remain uncredited. Until this situation is rectified, a comprehensive comparison of texts within the context of the larger medieval Irish devotional collections and a broader European and, in the case of many of the legends of the early martyrs, Near Eastern context, will not be possible.

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91 Keating, *Tri bhóir-ghaisthe an Bhídir* pp 172, 209-210. 92 Roche, *Canons of Irish manuscripts*, ii, p. 372. 93 Mac Niocaill, "Brevilogium" pp 323-9. Because the manuscript is partially damaged there is no way of ascertaining what exactly the animals were intended to represent in this version although, of course, one could quite easily make some reasonable assumptions. 94 Keating, *Tri bhóir-ghaisthe an Bhídir*, p. 41. See also de Vongeis, *The Golden Legend*, ii, p. 180. 95 I have attempted to do this elsewhere; see Ryan, "Witches on late medieval devotional practice". 96 Mac Niocaill, "Béire de Brevilogium" *N. Bonaventurae*, pp xxvii-xxviii.