

My paper concerns two radically distinct portrayals of genital injury. The first examples, drawn from legal and doctrinal narrative, describe the cultural norm of meaningful castration. The other, which provides my paper with its title, is from Peter of Cornwall's *Book of Revelations*. This set of one is an analogous injury that may mean nothing: neither penitential nor quite juridical, it may be just a strange injury, something that just happens. Rather than resolve this quandary, I'll instead conclude by exploring the ethics of interpreting literary accounts of torment.

Medieval records of castration as either a legal or extrajudicial punishment or humiliation are unsurprisingly numerous. Abelard was famously castrated by henchmen in the service of Heloise's uncle;<sup>1</sup> it numbers among the civic punishments luridly illustrated in the bas-de-page of a thirteenth-century manuscript of the *Coutumes de Toulouse*;<sup>2</sup> Norman nobles were infamous for blinding and castrating their enemies, preferring not to execute them, as more civilized lords were expected to do.<sup>3</sup>

One of castration's peculiarities, however, is its being both punishment and personal cure. We can readily identify a medieval theme not of castration anxiety, but of penis anxiety, where castration is the remedy. Abelard notably called his castration both a "just judgment" and "an act of divine mercy" that "cleansed rather than deprived me."<sup>4</sup> The beaver in the medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Cite Cohen and Wheeler *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* with no less than three essays devoted to Abelard's "calamity."

<sup>2</sup> BnF Latin Latin 9187 32v, late thirteenth century. Cite Barbara Morel *Une iconographie de la répression judiciaire: Le châtement dans l'enluminure en France du XIIIe au XVe siècle* 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Klaus van Eickels, "Gendered Violence: Castration and Blinding as Punishment for Treason in Normandy and Anglo-Norman England," *Gender & History* 16.3 (2004): 588–602.

<sup>4</sup> "mundavit potius quam privavit"

bestiary tradition represents this well: knowing that hunters wanted nothing from them but their testicles, beavers — *castor* in Latin — would bite them off, fling them in the hunter's face, and then scurry away, with at least their life intact. Bestiaries typically interpret the hunter as the devil, the beaver as a holy man, and the testicles as vice.<sup>5</sup> The interpretation may be too schematic however: the hunter could well be read as both desire and the very desiring self, not so much hunting as *incarnating* the testicles. This strange relationship, in which the self becomes the object of a mysterious, yet intimate agency, of what the apostle Paul complained of as "another law in my members,"<sup>6</sup> was what castration sought to resolve. It sought to make the (male) self whole.

For example, Caesarius of Heisterbach recalls a monk unable to live without women's company; his prior convinces him to spend one more night in the cloister; the wavering monk then dreams of encountering a butcher-like man who castrates him and feeds his genitals to a large, black dog. When he wakes up thinking that he had been "eunuchizatum," he delights in finding himself whole, and settles into remaining a monk.<sup>7</sup> More pathetic is the account of an

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<sup>5</sup> The [Aberdeen Bestiary](#), f 11r, is representative. Longest discussion of medieval beaver lore Ellen Lorraine Friedrich, 'Insinuating Indeterminate Gender: A Castration Motif in Guillaume de Lorris's *Romans de la Rose*,' 264-74, particularly attentive to gender ambiguity. Point to Anglo Saxon physiologus with beaver's testicles represented as negative space of hole in parchment/Sarah Kay's work on this.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 7:23. Matthew 19:12 Jack Collins CITATION The twenty canons of the first council of Nicea (325) begin by forbidding this method of solving desire; later canon law repeats the substance of the Nicean canon without much elaboration (see Sean Eisen Murphy, "The Letter of the Law: Abelard, Moses, and the Problem with being a Eunuch," *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004): 168-70). AND STACY 285 FOR WHETHER VIRTUOUS

<sup>7</sup> Alfons Hilka, ed., *Die Wundergeschichten des Caesarius von Heisterbach* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1933), 75, "Vix tenuiter obdormierat, et ecce! conspexit eminus virum horribilem in effigie carnificis ad se venientem, cultellum longum tenentem in manu, et sequebatur eum canis magnus et niger....Ille vero multum impetuose arreptis eius genitalibus abscondit canique proiecit, que ille mox devoravit." All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The story may originate in Gregory the Great's sixth-century *Dialogues*, in which the Italian hermit Equitius prays that his "carnis incentiva" might be tamed; at night, he sees himself (spiritually) castrated while an angel attends him ("assistente angelo eunuchizari se vidit" (PL 77:165C). From that time onward, all genital movement of his members was severed, as if he had no "sexus" in his body ("ac si sexum non haberet in corpore" PL 77:165C). Gerald of Wales' *Gemma ecclesiastica* has Hugh of Avalon/Lincoln cured of his sexual desire through a similar remedy (Ryan D. Giles, "The Miracle of Gerald the Pilgrim: Hagiographic Visions of Castration in the *Liber*

eleventh-century bishop of London, Hugh d'Orival, who had been told that similar, if more direct, means would cure his leprosy. As William of Malmesbury observed some centuries later, "so the bishop had to put up with the slur of being a eunuch" - *opprobrium spadonis* - "without finding any cure, for he remained leprous his whole life."<sup>8</sup>

One especially widely distributed version of these stories concludes Henry of Saltry's late twelfth-century *Tractatus de purgatorio Sancti Patrici*: it survives in some 150 Latin manuscripts, and 300 additional manuscripts of translations and adaptations into nearly all European languages, including, for example, seven independent French versions.<sup>9</sup> The work's enormous success drew pilgrims to Ireland's Station Island, where it located the gate to purgatory, from as far afield as Spain and Hungary, more or less uninterrupted until the site was demolished and

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*Sancti Jacobi and Milagros de Nuestra Señora*," *Neophilologus* 94 (2010): 444). William of Tocco provides Aquinas with a miraculous visitation from angels, who bind his genitals so he abhors and avoids women; see Jacqueline Murray, "Mystical Castration: Some Reflections on Peter Abelard, Hugh of Lincoln, and Sexual Control," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1999), 84. See also *Le prestre ki perdi les colles* (aka *De Connebert*), ends with 'two dogs fighting over the roasted testicles in the ruins of the blacksmith's shop' (Leech 'Castration' 219)

<sup>8</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificorum anglorum: The History of the English Bishops*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom with R. M. Thomson, vol 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 230-31. For terminology, see Mathew S. Kuefler, "Castration and Eunuchism in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (NY: Garland, 1996), 285-6 and Robert L. A. Clark, "Nature Abhors," 290. The most famous self-castrate of the early Middle Ages is Origen, according to the report in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8 (Penguin 186; for [Rufinus's Latin](#)). See Brundage *Law, Sex, and Christian Society* 65, for a handful of other examples. The *Codex Calixtinus*, among several other twelfth-century works, records a miracle from the Santiago de Compostella route, in which a demon entices a pilgrim into castrating and then killing himself; he is miraculously resurrected, and his wounds turned into mere scars, but his genitals are not restored (Giles, "Miracle."). Later Christian men sometimes sought numbness instead, which may be thought a kind of temporary castration: two twelfth-century Englishmen, the hermit Godric and Aelred of Rievaulx reportedly kept a basin of icy water in the floor of their cells, into which they would immerse when needed (cited Murray "Male Embodiment" 15).

<sup>9</sup> The history of the development of the story has been told often. For a brief and thorough account, Carol J. Zalenski "St Patrick's Purgatory: Pilgrimage Motifs in a Medieval Otherworld Vision," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46.4 (1985): 469-70; at length, Michael Haren and Yolande de Pontfarcy, ed., *The Medieval Pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory: Lough Derg and the European Tradition* (Enniskillen: Clogher Historical Society, 1988). For studies of the emergence of Purgatory, see the classic work by Le Goff, as well as C. S. Watkins, "Sin, Penance, and Purgatory in the Anglo-Norman Realm: The Evidence of Visions and Ghost Stories," *Past and Present* 175 (2002): 3-33, which treats resistance and indifference to the concept outside university settings as it solidified during the 'long twelfth century.'

suppressed early in the eighteenth century; since 1931, the island has once more officially welcomed pilgrims. The *Tractatus* largely concerns a terrifying penitential physical journey through a place of torment taken by an Irish knight, Owein, who then enjoys a brief respite in paradise before being returned to this world.<sup>10</sup> Though scholars and indeed many of the work's medieval adaptors have tended to concentrate on Owein's adventure,<sup>11</sup> Henry ends his treatise not with the knight, but with a series of clerics conquering their desire.<sup>12</sup> In the final story, a priest discovers an infant girl abandoned in a cemetery, and raises her charitably until, to quote a similar moment from Ezekiel 16, she is "old enough for love."<sup>13</sup> The demons who had left the baby for the priest tempt him effectively. But just before he rapes the girl, he flees her bedchamber, and, outside, -- and here I quote from Marie de France's translation -- he "cuts off his genitals / and cast them away from him." End of story. Nothing more is said of the girl.<sup>14</sup>

All in all, the *Tractatus* is chiefly about worldly desire as lurking catastrophe. Finishing the work with a castration -- again, in what may be hundreds of manuscripts in a culture that officially frowned on auto-castration -- suggests a final location and resolution of this overriding

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<sup>10</sup> I stress 'place of torment' rather than 'purgatory' here, as Owein is the only one among the sufferers being cleansed; Watkins characterizes the tormentors as 'puzzled presiding demons' (29).

<sup>11</sup> For example, David L. Pike's "Le dreit enfer vus mosterruns': Marie de France's *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*" *Viator* 32 (2001), 47, summarizes and discusses Owein's journey at length, while dispatching the last 300 lines of Marie's 2300-line translation with nothing more than "similar encounters and visions that will lend credence to Owein's journey." Matthew of Paris ends its account of Saint Patrick's Purgatory with Owein's story (*Chronica majora*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, Vol 2 (London: Longman & Co, 1874), 203), as do the Middle English versions in Robert Easting, ed., *Saint Patrick's Purgatory* EETS o.s. 298 (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1991) and in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 192-94. An initial check of a handful of French prose versions in manuscript through the Bibliothèque nationale de France Gallica website suggests that many adaptations ended with Owein's return. A rare exception to this trend is the summary in Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 167-68.

<sup>12</sup> Check: Vincent of Beauvais, Roger of Wendover *Flores Historiarum*, SEL, Peter de Natlibus *Catalogus sanctorum*, Calderón's 1636 play *El Purgatorio de San Patricio*.

<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel 16:8.

<sup>14</sup> Michael J. Curley, ed. and trans. *Saint Patrick's Purgatory (Espurgatoire Seint Patriz)* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), "e ses genitailles trencha / hors les geta de maintenant" (2272-73).

problem.<sup>15</sup> It may be notable that all recorded medieval pilgrims to Saint Patrick's Purgatory were elite men,<sup>16</sup> for, according to Jacqueline Murray, *the* medieval scholar for this topic, "the whole problem of the body was perceived to be located in the male genitals. Once they were removed, it was believed that the problem of lack of control of the flesh would simply disappear."<sup>17</sup>

Augustine's *City of God* notably solved the problem of Edenic sexuality by concentrating only on Adam's penis, imagining that Adam would have been able to move this member "without lust,"<sup>18</sup> just as we can move our feet and hands by our own will. Though his subsequent proofs tend towards the bizarre - ranging from people wiggling their ears, to professional farters who "produce the effect of singing," to a "man accustomed to sweat whenever he wished"<sup>19</sup> - he is obviously aiming to repair the split between the self and its will, by imagining that we - meaning men -- might have once been able to obey ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

In thought like this, the specifically affordance of male genitalia offered a particular

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<sup>15</sup> For the longer version, will observe that while infernal castration is, at most, rare, genital punishment is not; for example, see the illustration of the lustful in the 1346 Saint Patrick's Purgatory fresco of in the refectory of the convent of the Sisters of Saint Claire in Todi, Italy (Plate 6, Carla de Petris, "Saint Patrick's Purgatory: A Fresco in Todi, Italy," *Studi irlandesi* 2 (2012): 255-74), which, although poorly reproduced, in an unreliable article, may represent genital punishment. For the larger otherworld tradition, see, for example, the table of hanging punishments from early pagan, Jewish, and Christian otherworld journeys in Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 87, or, in more detail, the apocalypses of Peter and Paul in Edgar Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, Vol. II (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965).

<sup>16</sup> Dorothea R. French, "Ritual, Gender, and Power Strategies: Male Pilgrimage to Saint Patrick's Purgatory," *Religion* 24 (1994): 103-115.

<sup>17</sup> Murray "The Law of Sin that is in my members': The Problem of Male Embodiment," in Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe* (Routledge: New York, 2002) 17. Murray discusses this aspect with particular attention to Abelard in "Mystical Castration," 76-80.

<sup>18</sup> "pudendam libidinem non habent" (XIV.22)

<sup>19</sup> "Nonnulli ab imo sine paedore ullo ita numerosos pro arbitrio sonitus edunt, ut ex illa etiam parte cantare videantur. Ipse sum expertus, sudare hominem solere cum vellet." (XIV.23)

<sup>20</sup> "et non obediens Deo, non potuit obedire nec sibi" (XIV.24).

solution to this particularly male problem of worldly desire,<sup>21</sup> as they can be excised while leaving the rest of the body intact, and their absence is easily evident to anyone who cares to check. Self-inflicted castration casts away desire for those who feel desire as improper to themselves; castration shows desire as *demonstrably* resolved; and finally, castration retroactively presents the problem as having been solvable. In other words, castration takes something away while also furnishing the myth that the penis really was to blame for desire's disordering.

Castration delivers a sense of newfound wholeness, a newly unified self, undistracted and in control, and suggests that it was the burden of the penis that stymied self-mastery. If, in the logic of medieval misogyny, the female body was disordered desire incarnated,<sup>22</sup> and if excessively practiced sexuality, with whatever partner, effeminized men,<sup>23</sup> then the genitalia was the most female part of a man's body.<sup>24</sup> Unmanning thus paradoxically gifts men with

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<sup>21</sup> The problem was, of course, more particular to the celibate clergy of Roman Catholicism. The last twenty years have produced many studies of their masculinity. In the introduction to her anthology *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), Claire Lees established the field's methodology by emphasizing the "multifaceted dynamic of male experience" that operated dialectically, rather than hierarchically, in relationship to femininity (xx). More recently, Ruth Mazo Karras, "Thomas Aquinas's Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 52-67, argues that the "heroic chastity" (57) of clerics was a genre of masculinity rather than, as R. W. Swanson claims, a third gender; a more detailed, nuanced account of sex/gender continuum in medieval Christianity appears in the same volume, in Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" 34-51.

<sup>22</sup> For example, in the early decades of the twelfth century, Osbert of Clare hectored Ida of Barking with the following, "Conquer the woman; conquer the flesh; conquer desire" (quoted in Murray, "on Flesh," 43).

<sup>23</sup> For example, an anonymous twelfth-century Christian commentator on Leviticus 22:24 observes that animals with damaged or missing testicles symbolize those who are "effeminantur" (PL 175:669A) not by the loss of their genitals, but rather by "turpitudinis" (cited Murphy "Letter of the Law," 177).

<sup>24</sup> For expansion of this paper, will observe this muddling of gender categories via Murry "Male Embodiment," 14, that men actually "hotter" than women, and therefore "more susceptible to sexual desire." Perhaps also note story from Liudprand of Cremona *Antapodosis*, about tenth-century marquess of Spoleto talked out of castrating her prisoners by their wives, who argued that "testicles rightly [belong] to the women, as without these the women could have neither pleasure nor children" (Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages* 22).

wholeness and a better maleness.<sup>25</sup> Castration becomes the surest route to bestowing on men the illusory gift of the phallus, male power's mythical thing, which should never be confused with the actual, always inadequate genitalia.

My next story of genital injury comes from another account of Saint Patrick's Purgatory, but breaks with nearly all the conventions of what was then still a young tradition. It belongs to the *Revelations* of Peter of Cornwall.<sup>26</sup> This massive compendium was assembled some 20 years after Henry of Saltry's *Tractatus*; avowedly committed to proving the immortality of the human soul, Peter's work collects more than 1,000 individual records of spiritual visions and visits to heaven, hell, and less certainly identifiable otherworld places, nearly all taken from the desert fathers, a handful of saints' lives, writings by Bede and Gregory the Great, and other timeworn, doctrinally tested texts. Without any attempt to systematize its otherworldly material, the *Revelations'* only consistent doctrine is that the afterlife exists, and that demons, angels, and the spirits of the dead can visit, trouble, and save the living.

Several of its visions are unique to this collection, suggesting that Peter or his staff had

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<sup>25</sup> For a later example, see the personal emblems of Paolo Giovio and Giovanni Bernardino, sixteenth-century scholars who emblemized themselves as self-castrating beavers: Kenneth Gouwens, "Emasculat[i]on as Empowerment: Lessons of Beaver Lore for two Italian Humanists," *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 22.4 (2015): 536-562. This is not, of course, to deny the force and justness of the more usual interpretation of castration in secular punishment. For a religious version of such an insult, see Roscelin of Compiègne, for example, who in 1118 mocked Abelard as an "imperfecti hominis" (imperfect man), no longer deserving to be called "Petrus" (because of the masculine grammatical ending), and having two heads "unum viri, alterum mulieris" (PL 178: 372B) [perhaps say more about this as common mode in mockery of eunuchs: Robert L. A. Clark, "Culture Loves a Void," 287-88, on *Vetula* 2.21-2 and Jean Le Fèvre's *La Vieille*. For an introduction to the study of Eunuchs, which, in part, points out that cultures with widespread practices of castrated court or religious attendants did not think eunuchs as "not men," see Kathryn M. Ringrose, "Eunuchs in Historical Perspective," *History Compass* 5.2 (2007): 495-505, whose comparative study chiefly concerns the courts of ancient China, Byzantium, and various Islamic cultures.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Easting and Richard Sharpe, ed. and trans., *Peter of Cornwall's Book of Revelations* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2013).

conducted something like a folkloric survey. However these new stories are mostly about canons or monks who flee or excel in their orders who return after their death to attest either to their punishment or their reward, or about other vowed religious who watch as devils invisibly tempt and torment their fellows, who either earn divine favor, or succumb and are dragged away to eternal torment. Being so much like stories in other monastic compilations, Peter's "unique" material is mostly just a symptom of more general monastic cultural tendencies.

One vision stands out however. This is Peter of Cornwall's account of St Patrick's Purgatory. His version of the story runs as follows: a knight enters a large and beautiful hall, and is greeted by its master, a certain King Gulinus and his retinue, who may have just returned from a hunt. When Gulinus's daughter enters, the knight at once "blazes up"<sup>27</sup> with love for her. Gulinus asks the knight if he would like to "use the embraces"<sup>28</sup> of his daughter, and the knight says yes. In the bed Gulinus had prepared, she and the knight are about to have sex, when he discovers himself instead embracing a "most ancient, arid, and misshapen trunk,"<sup>29</sup> and his penis—now become a twig—trapped tight in a knot in her body. A servant compounds his misery by hammering away at the knight's penis for hours on end, simultaneously shredding it and wedging it further into the knot. The Latin here is richly ambiguous: "uirilem uirgam" can mean penis, or, literally, the "male twig"; "truncam" means either a tree trunk or a torso; and, as its modern editors emphasize, the minister who bangs on the knight does so *uiriliter*, "like a man."

Many people in this room likely already know that one common Latin word for a castrate,

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<sup>27</sup> *exarsit*

<sup>28</sup> *uti amplexibus*

<sup>29</sup> *truncum vetustissimum et aridissimum et deformem*

*spadonis*, also means a "severed vine," suggesting a richly symbolic field of floral metaphors.

The knight then undergoes further torments: boiled and liquefied like wax in a hot bath, then pierced by spikes of ice in a cold one, he is finally trussed from the rafters in a room studded with spiky stones, and battered about by Gulinus's ministers until his brains pour out.<sup>30</sup> At length, dawn comes, and he finds himself whole at the entrance to Purgatory. Peter concludes by scoffing at the reluctance of other men to visit this place, though he admits few "emerge from there without debility or even some loss of mind."

Peter normalizes the story to a degree by dating it precisely (to 1170) and by prefacing it with a chain of Irish witnesses that locate the purgatory where others had. But as this introductory material is largely irrelevant to the story itself, the impression is of Peter of Cornwall trying to wrestle an unruly story into submission. The story *almost* seems to make sense. Many of the tradition's features are present: a secular man visits a site in Ireland, travels through a portal, and physically visits a place where he undergoes extraordinarily pain and suffering, in particular, a succession of hot and cold waters. But most elements of Peter's version fit no known tradition or model. Only the sharp rocks that torment the knight may have some particular connection, since an eighteenth-century skeptic of the site recorded them as still being present.<sup>31</sup> But the perilous bridge, the demonic scorn, particular sins – lust, apostasy, and so on – all punished appropriately, the invitation to despair and remain in torment: all of these are missing.

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<sup>30</sup> *usque ad effusionem cerebri*

<sup>31</sup> John Richardson, *The Great Folly, Superstition, and Idolatry of Pilgrimages in Ireland; especially to that of Patrick's Purgatory* (Dublin: J. Hyde, 1727), 9. tunnels so "thick set with small pointed Stones, [so] that the greatest Saint in the Church of Rome could not bear it now."

Certain aspects of the story recall widespread otherworldly hospitality motifs, common in Irish as well as continental literature, like the king's gift of his daughter to the visitor, recorded in several entries in the *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* under the category of "sex hospitality."<sup>32</sup> Similarly common is the visitor finding himself trapped by receiving otherworldly hospitality. But attempts to link the name of the king to some other figure from narrative or even pre-Christian divinities, or to link him to accounts of the so-called wild hunt have all led to nothing.

Perhaps the most mysterious figure is the king's daughter. Unnamed and silent, become a hideous log, she recalls fairies from German and Scandinavian folklore, like the *skogsrå* of Sweden,<sup>33</sup> who appeared as beautiful women from the front, but as a tree or even a hollowed out log from behind. We might also tentatively connect her with the so-called 'sovereignty hags' of medieval and, presumably, pre-medieval Irish tales, perhaps most famously reutilized in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's tale, a repulsive older woman, generally found in a forest, who demands that a hero sleep with her. When he does, sometimes only after his siblings demur, he is rewarded with sovereignty, an answer he needs, and/or a now beautiful lover.<sup>34</sup> But Peter of Cornwall's log lady moves in the opposite direction, from beauty and sovereignty — which we might assume from her connection to her father—and finally to hideousness and the devastation

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1952), T281, p. 488.

<sup>33</sup> John Lindow, *Swedish Legends and Folktales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 105-7; Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 26; and Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, ed., *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 217, where it is a sovereignty figure of a limited sort (the man who sleeps with her successfully shoots a bear). Most of these records have been collected by modern folklorists since the nineteenth century. For similar Estonian and Russian accounts, see Torsten Martin Gustaf Löfstedt, *Russian Legends about Forest Spirits in the Context of Northern European Mythology* (PhD Thesis, UC Berkeley, 1993) 162-65.

<sup>34</sup> Note on sovereignty hag, built from Passmore and Carter, *The English Loathly Lady* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008).

of the knight's hopes. And here she is literally just an object, present only to elicit desire or horror, or, through becoming not only a log, but an *ugly log*, a standard, gendered clerical revelation of the disgusting truth underlying all sexual desire, particularly of men for women.<sup>35</sup>

All that Peter of Cornwall's account preserves of the Purgatory legend is its location, its name, and the class and gender of the visitor, and his very physical journey. But the knight neither fasts, prays, nor confesses before entering.<sup>36</sup> Owein seeks purgation, while this knight seeks nothing. His visit to Gulinus and desire for his daughter is far less a penitential motif than one from *conte d'aventure*. His tormentors are not obviously demonic, and, unlike Owein, the knight never saves himself by calling out to Christ. If Peter has aimed to prove the immortality of the soul and the real existence of the otherworld, it's notable not only that the knight travels in his own body, not his spirit, but also that he encounters no one who ever shared an existence in his own world - no spirits of the dead, no references to the living, none of the privileged knowledge of the present or future to which the dead had access. He never sees paradise, and, also unlike Owein, he emerges from the purgatory without a desire to become a monk. He is only weakened, not chastened. And then the story just stops. Though we might collect still other analogues,<sup>37</sup> it remains difficult to comprehend what we were supposed to take away from this story. It would be far easier to work with were it not called a Purgatory and not meant for a purpose to which it is so poorly suited. Why was the knight's penis transformed and shredded?

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<sup>35</sup> Consider, for example, the story of Gerald of Aurillac's temptation for a beautiful girl, cured only when the girl miraculously appears "deformed" to Gerald's sight; cited in Murry "Male Embodiment," 13-14.

<sup>36</sup> For a description of the pilgrimage features of the main line of the tradition, Zalenski "St Patrick's Purgatory." For a brief account of the standard account of cleansing before entering the purgatory, see G. Waterhouse, "Another Early German Account of St Patrick's Purgatory," *Hermathena* 23.48 (1933): 115, which ends, unlike the main line of the tradition, with a short exemplum in which a rich man is demonically immolated in life for refusing to believe in Purgatory.

<sup>37</sup> Will want a note on genital injury in fabliaux – only 2 'real' castrations, Mary Leech 'Castration of the Shrew' 219

Why was it returned to him? We don't know.

I can most easily imagine that the story ended up in Peter's collection because hell is the favored site for imagining and transgressing the limits of bodily selfhood. The Carolingian vision of Fulrad, for example, sees the damned "now turned around on this or that flank, now lying face up or face down, now upright, now compressed, now sitting, now lying down again, in anguish, twisting about one another more in the manner of snakes than humans."<sup>38</sup> Another of Peter of Cornwall's unique visions has his own grandfather escape an infernal house by scrambling up a set of earthenware jars, which close over his hands, "like pursestrings," but which he uses later as shields when a crowd of demons pelt him with wood and fire. Though this episode ends with a claim that the visionary explained "all the things that he had seen,"<sup>39</sup> Peter notably omits that explanation, because the strangeness itself may be the point.

Typical methods of meaning-making seem to fail here, and to fail catastrophically in Peter of Cornwall's story of Saint Patrick's Purgatory. I'll propose that we ought not to push too hard to resolve this problem. Nor should we propose that the meaninglessness itself has some greater meaning, which is to say, we ought to avoid the temptation of apophasis, that mystical method in which the presumptively infinite, ungraspable qualities of God—or, a text, or whatever—are gestured at and honored by describing what these things are not. This mode elevates meaninglessness into its own master code, and, in the case of Peter of Cornwall's story, does so

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<sup>38</sup> Karl Hempe, "Eine ungedruckte Vision aus karolingischer Zeit," *Neues Archiv* 22 (1897): 629, "Nam nunc in uno nunc in alio latere vertebatur, nunc supinus nunc prostratus, nunc erectus nunc contractus, nunc sedes nunc iterum iacens, more columbri potius quam hominis anxiando volvebatur."

<sup>39</sup> Book of Revelations 209, 211

with an account of extraordinary suffering.

To make this as clear as possible: the main line of the medieval castration discourse is, of course, that it is an assault on manhood or familial reproduction and all supposed to go with these qualities. The main line of the Saint Peter's Purgatory tradition belongs to a discourse of castration as cure, not a diminishment but instead a perfection of manhood. And, in Peter of Cornwall's Purgatory tradition, genital injury is just something that happens. Our knight probably should not have slept with the log lady, but that may be all we can take from it. Peter provides this story in a seemingly meaningful framework, among nearly a 1000 otherwise typical monastic stories of punishment, reward, and spiritual vision, but this story, alone among both Peter's collection and the larger purgatorial tradition, refuses the straightforward sense that is otherwise so typical of these kinds of stories.

This senselessness finally suggests a small set of critiques of the supposed meaningfulness of representations of violence. I offer Anna Kłosowska's analysis of the Mater Dolorosa at the foot of the cross, who experiences "suffering without transcendence," because her pain, unlike her son's, solves nothing, cures nothing, redeems nothing.<sup>40</sup> Kłosowska here prefers the mother to the Christ. Maggie Nelson's *Art of Cruelty* advances points like this by arguing against the supposed "relationship between injury and fact, clarity and cruelty," against the notion that truth, good action, knowledge, and least of all good art require revelation, surprise, horror, or destruction, that they require violence to shock us out of our complacency.<sup>41</sup> Without denying the bizarre hilarity of what the knight undergoes, we can think with Kłosowska

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<sup>40</sup> Anna Kłosowska, *Queer Love in the Middle Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.

<sup>41</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: Norton, 2012), 95.

and Nelson to propose that the very meaninglessness of the knight's suffering should be preserved as meaningless, and that the best response to his pain may be to refuse to interpret it. Though we might trace more and more possibilities of meaning, through increasingly acute psychoanalytic, folkloric, and doctrinal contextualization and analysis, perhaps we ought not to, or at least ought not to with an eye towards resolution: an explanation can often have the force of a theodicy, an attempt to justify suffering according to some master code.

Of course, we can do no good for the knight himself. This is all imaginary. It would probably be foolish to label what I am proposing here as a kind of *ethical* relationship to this pain. But I do think that Peter of Cornwall's purgatory offers a chance to critics to rethink the relationship between, on the one hand, narrative pain and peril, and, on the other, the production of meaning. After all, making meaning can seem to align us with the agents of juridical violence and their attempts to confirm the law, and extrajudicial sovereignty, by writing it on the body. There may be some value in asserting that sometimes a castration is just a castration, without the burden or meanings, and protections, insisted upon by either Freudian or monastic anxiety.