

# POWERFUL WOMEN OR PATRIARCHAL WEAPONS?

## TWO MEDIEVAL IRISH SAINTS

**ABSTRACT:** The history of medieval Irish women is elusive, despite a rich variety of textual sources. These are often normative rather than descriptive and are a predominantly male clerical product. This paper will examine the dossiers of two female saints, both from Co. Cork. It will ask whether we can identify female aspirations and female voices in the literary celebration of their careers. Are they models of female empowerment or do their representations ultimately support male power structures?

**KEYWORDS:** medieval women, gender, clerics, saints, Cranat, marriage, Brigit, Lucy, masochism, sadism, Canir, Senán of Inis Cathaig, defence of women, misogyny.

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The histories of early medieval European women are elusive. The official ideologies of their cultures were clerical and male, obscuring female experiences beneath the distortions of highly gendered christian attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Ireland shared and contributed to these, although this has been somewhat hidden by the reluctance of many medieval historians to consider the christian contexts and contents of texts composed in Irish; after all, Latin and the vernacular formed the poles of Irish literacy.<sup>2</sup> Another hurdle is the excessive romanticisation of a frequently imaginary ‘Celtic’ society in Ireland. ‘Celtic’ is too often treated as a synonym for pagan;<sup>3</sup> research on medieval Irish women has been stifled by the chimerical shadows of vanished Celts. This has been rectified in recent years, notably in the fields of Irish law and literature.<sup>4</sup> Yet, there is only one

<sup>1</sup> P. Brown, *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early christianity* (New York 1988); V. L. Bullough, J. A. Brundage (eds), *Handbook of medieval sexuality* (New York & London 1996).

<sup>2</sup> For example, D. Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge Ma. 1985) 30, dismissed the value of vernacular sources in his consideration of the Irish medieval household, with the result that his study is flawed. It is difficult to imagine a similar dismissal being made of sources in other major European vernaculars.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to deny the usefulness and validity of the term in specific circumstances. For an overview P. Simms-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism’ *CMCS* 30 (Winter 1998) 1–35

<sup>4</sup> Mention must be made of the ground-breaking collection of essays in R. Thurneysen et al (eds), *Studies in early Irish law* (Dublin 1936). For recent work: D. Ó Corráin ‘Women and the law in early Ireland’, in M. O’Dowd, S. Wichert (eds), *Chattel, servant or citizen: women’s status in church, state and society* (Belfast 1995) 45–57; B. Jaski, ‘Marriage laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages’, in C. E. Meek, M. K. Simms (eds), *‘The fragility of her sex’? Medieval Irish women in their European context* (Dublin 1996) 16–42. Literary studies include M. Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘Women in early

major modern monograph on female roles and representations in early medieval Ireland.<sup>5</sup> In it, Lisa Bitel emphasises that we must search for the female voice in textual silences and discontinuities, locating clearings in the jungle growth of ecclesiastical literature.<sup>6</sup> Her work, while not totally satisfactory, does place Irish women within a christian circumference.

The Irish evidence, like that elsewhere, poses particular challenges and opportunities—its forms are distinctive. It includes a body of vernacular legal material, unparalleled in volume and scope in the medieval West;<sup>7</sup> genealogies, encoding ideology as much as DNA, contain an unrivalled level of detail;<sup>8</sup> Irish annals provide a continuous and contemporary political narrative, from at least the second half of the sixth century, which has no early medieval equal.<sup>9</sup> Women feature in all, even if their position is usually marginal to that of the male aristocratic and clerical elite, a marginality which is not unique, for the voices of the non-aristocratic, male and female, recede forever beyond the threshold of sound.

There are other difficulties. The law tracts and genealogies tend to be normative and prescriptive; they are not always descriptive of real people and situations. Annals skew the memory of person and event through the inevitably distorting lens of authorship and context. It is sometimes impossible to rescue women from the sea of hungry pasts. Furthermore, the virtual absence of charters<sup>10</sup> means that it is tricky to get a firm hold on the practical property rights of women, as distinct from the theory presented by the laws—a significant drawback because status and power were intimately related to property use and possession. Most serious by far, and here Ireland is certainly not alone, is the lack of any substantial body of literature authored by

Irish myths and sagas', *The Crane Bag* 14 (1980) 12–19; P. Kelly 'The *Táin* as literature', in J. P. Mallory (ed), *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast 1992) 69–102.

<sup>5</sup> L. Bitel, *Land of women: Tales of sex and gender from early Ireland* (Cornell 1996); a much earlier (and nationalistic) survey is H. Concannon, *Daughters of Banba* (Dublin 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Bitel, *Land of Women*, 1–17.

<sup>7</sup> F. Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin 1988), is the best introduction.

<sup>8</sup> A large number are edited in M. A. O'Brien (ed), *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1976); discussed by D. Ó Corráin, 'Creating the past: the early Irish genealogical tradition', *Peritia* 12 (1998) 177–208.

<sup>9</sup> For an introduction to the annal collections, G. Mac Niocaill, *The medieval Irish annals*, Medieval Irish History Series 3 (Dublin 1975); K. Grabowski, D. N. Dumville, *Chronicles and annals of medieval Ireland and Wales: the Clonmacnoise-group texts*, Studies in Celtic History 4 (Woodbridge 1984). The Irish annals dwarf contemporary Frankish and Anglo-Saxon examples.

<sup>10</sup> There are early charters in the *Additamenta* of the Book of Armagh, edited by L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts from the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979) 166–79; G. Mac Niocaill (ed), *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais 1133–1161* (Dublin 1961), collects later instances.

women. This is in contrast to the vast amount written about women by men. Attempts have been made to match early medieval Irish texts with female authors.<sup>11</sup> Generally, male authorship has to be presumed, unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, as literacy was largely controlled by male ecclesiastics.

These male ecclesiastics constructed representation upon representation of women, generally justifying female subordination in society and through time. Some of the most revealing are in literary narratives such as sagas and saints' Lives, the latter composed in both Latin and Irish, the former in the vernacular. It has been decisively demonstrated that the two genres were inter-linked and that each influenced the other;<sup>12</sup> they were the dominant narrative forms of an Irish christian literature. The saints' Lives stand out as exceptionally valuable witnesses to clerical attitudes for they draw from the deep common well of christian writings while, simultaneously, they reveal specific cultural prejudices. These Lives are much concerned with women and their stereotyped failings,<sup>13</sup> with one dramatic exception—the saint. And she is the exception: there are many more Lives of men than women. Nonetheless, the female saint, as subject of biography and anecdote, could be a figure of empowerment for women in medieval societies, because sanctity was a tool of legitimisation that potentially outweighed gender difference.<sup>14</sup> The Kingdom of Heaven was governed by its representatives on Earth. Cranat<sup>15</sup> and Canir, both Cork saints, are two female representatives of this

<sup>11</sup> Uallach daughter of Muinecháin († 934), *banfhile Érend* 'female poet of Ireland', is commemorated in the Annals of Inisfallen, but cannot be linked with any extant literature. T. O. Clancy, 'Women poets in early medieval Ireland', in Meek & Simms, *The fragility of her sex*, 43–72 discusses the possibility that some extant texts were composed by women. The best candidate is the Old Irish poem *Caillech Bérrí*. M. Ní Dhonnchadha, in an unpublished paper, has convincingly suggested a female author and/or, at the least, a female audience. For a summary of her argument, 'Reading the so-called *Caillech Bérrí* poem', *Newsletter of the School of Celtic Studies* 6 (1993) 15.

<sup>12</sup> Recognised by F. Ó Briain, 'Saga themes in Irish hagiography' in S. Pender (ed), *Féilsgribhinn Torna* (Cork 1947) 33–42; subsequently developed by L. Bieler, 'Hagiography and romance in medieval Ireland', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 6 (1975) 13–24; the issues are considered in K. McCone, *Pagan past and christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth 1990); a recent major exposition is J. F. Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients: literary myths of medieval Ireland* (Ithaca, New York, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Examples are considered in L. Bitel, "'Conceived in sins, born in delights": stories of procreation from early Ireland', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no 2 (1992) 181–201; idem, *Land of Women*; T. O. Clancy, 'Fools and adultery in some early Irish texts', *Ériu* 44 (1993) 105–24.

<sup>14</sup> For sanctity as legitimisation, a starting point is H. Delehay, *The Legends of the saints* (Brussels 1955); P. Brown, *The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin christianity* (London 1981); idem, 'The rise and function of the holy man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman studies* 61 (1971) 80–101; P. Rousseau, 'Ascetics as mediators and as teachers', in J. Howard-Johnston, P. A. Hayward (eds), *The cult of the saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford 1999) 45–59.

<sup>15</sup> This is an unusual personal name and there is some doubt about the quality of the first vowel. Alternatives to *cran* are the unflattering *crán* 'sow' and *crón* 'red-brown'. The second syllable is the female *at/ait* ending. The name has been latinised as *Cronata* and *Cranata*. I have simply adopted the spelling used by C. Plummer, *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica* (Brussels 1925) 157–59; 164–67.

Kingdom. They are celebrated in hagiography, Cranat through a brief Irish Life and Canir in the vernacular Life of St Senán of Inis Cathaig.<sup>16</sup> The two texts raise a number of issues. Do these saints bolster the male church establishment? Did women directly contribute to their portrayals? It might seem that a saint such as all-powerful Brigit would be a more suitable subject for these questions. It is arguable, however, that the articulation of Brigit's sanctity so divorces her from the female norm that she would confuse rather than reveal. Cranat and Canir, unsung and virtually unknown in modern Ireland, are emblematic of the many holy women who are remembered in the web of christian placenames.

## CRANAT

Cranat, a saint of only local importance, was affiliated to Fir Maige Féne, a mid-ranking Munster people who have given their name to Fermoy. The saint, who seems to have flourished in the sixth century, is not mentioned in the annals and was probably little known outside Fir Maige. Her two major church dedications, Kilcranatan (Cell Cranatan) and Hermitage (Dísert Cranatan), are in that people's territory. Indeed, the link between saint and Fir Maige is underlined by the claim that Cranat was the uterine sister of their king. It is possible, although unlikely, that she is the same as the Cráebnat commemorated on July 17 in the *Martyrology of Donegal*.<sup>17</sup> Meagre details can be supplemented by a short later medieval Life of Cranat that draws on early medieval traditions and is certainly indebted, as will become apparent, to the Lives of Brigit. There is no reason to think it is anything other than a male product. The question remains as to whether it records female aspirations.

The Life is no more than an anecdote which purports to describe the defining moment in Cranat's career, a moment when she successfully opposes Cairpre Crom († 579/80), King of Munster, and asserts her autonomy. Cairpre attempts to marry the saint against her will, with the full approval of Fínán, her half-brother and king of Fir Maige Féne. Cranat, being a woman, would have been legally at the mercy of her male

<sup>16</sup> This anecdote, dignified with the title *Betha Cranatan* 'Life of Cranat', is edited by Plummer, *Miscellanea*, 160–63 (text), 164–69 (translation and notes). Canir appears in the Life of Senán in the Book of Lismore. Edited by W. Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, 2 volumes (Oxford 1890), I 54–74: 72–3 (text); II 201–22, lines 2416–49: 219–20 (translation). In both cases I have provided my own translation

<sup>17</sup> Discussed by Plummer, *Miscellanea*, 159.

kindred,<sup>18</sup> but she is more than a woman and, as a saint, adopts miraculous strategies. She decides to preserve her virginity through the tried and trusted ascetic method of self-mutilation.<sup>19</sup> Cranat's mutilation is arresting—she plucks out both her eyes. This is described in the following scene:

... ro chinn ina menmain na raghadh go fer 7 nach millfedh a hoige... Ocus ro bhen a dí súil asa cinn 7 dosfucc i llaimh na dí chailleach battar ina farradh .i. Maelbracha 7 Laithche.<sup>20</sup>

...she made up her mind that she would not go to a man and that she would not ruin her virginity.... And she struck her two eyes out of her head and she put them into the hands of the two nuns, Máel Bracha and Laithche, who were in her company.

The opposition of the saint to marriage is a well-attested theme in medieval writing, originating in the radical demands of early christian women who rejected the role stereotyping of the Later Roman Empire. For them, the preservation of virginity and the rejection of sexual relations was liberating.<sup>21</sup> This was not to last. Liberation became institutionalisation and female freedom was circumscribed. The importance of virginity and the struggle to preserve it was reified as a literary device. Thus, Cranat's determined defence of her virginity is a christian commonplace.

Her particular, and shocking, realisation of it is indebted to the example of Brigit.<sup>22</sup> In the seventh-century Latin Life, *Vita Prima*, God liquifies one of Brigit's eyes so that she can avoid marriage.<sup>23</sup> This was subsequently developed in the Old Irish Life, *Bethu Brigte*, where Brigit blinds herself by thrusting a finger into her eye, and the incident became a mainstay of the saint's cult.<sup>24</sup> Brigit's physical deformity convinces her father to let the saint enter the religious life. Subsequently and unsurprisingly Brigit's eye is restored. This is extreme; it also relates to two traditions. On the one hand, it evokes the

<sup>18</sup> The basic position in Kelly, *Guide*, 68–79; Ó Corráin, 'Women and the law in early Ireland'.

<sup>19</sup> V. L. Bullough, D. Dixon, J. Dixon, 'Sadism, masochism and history, or when is behaviour sado-masochistic?' in R. Porter, M. Teich (eds), *Sexual knowledge, sexual science: the history of attitudes to sexuality* (Cambridge 1994) 47–62.

<sup>20</sup> *Miscellanea*, 160, §1.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Body and society*; J. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, independent virgins* (London 1991).

<sup>22</sup> The similarity between the two was noted by Plummer, *Miscellanea*, 158.

<sup>23</sup> The best published edition of *Vita Prima* is still J. Colgan, *Triadis thaumaturgae acta* (Louvain 1647), 517–45, §17; translated by S. Connolly, 'Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*, 119 (1989), 14–49, §19.

<sup>24</sup> D. Ó hAodha (ed), *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin 1978) §14–15.

Irish ideal of physical perfection which kings were meant to embody. This was more than a motif: the mutilation of a king could put him out of office and there are several instances of blinding being used as a method of political exclusion, particularly from the eleventh century.<sup>25</sup> Brigit's experience is a subversive reading of the ideology and practice.

In addition, her mutilation is tied to the christian motif of bodily pain as a path to spiritual perfection, which arose from the belief that suffering was necessary for salvation.<sup>26</sup> Christ is the obvious inspiration. However, the motif came to be most memorably applied to women, especially the female virgin martyr who is frequently portrayed as the object of sadistic torture in christian texts. These narratives foreground an almost pornographic sexual pain, and a concomitant extreme pleasure experienced by the torturer, sufferer and audience as the virginal suffering body is disturbingly eroticised.<sup>27</sup> An example is St Lucy of Syracuse († 304), martyred under Diocletian, who is represented in medieval iconography holding her eyes on a plate. It is likely that the authors of *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte* had Lucy in mind and that her dismemberment underlies their description of Brigit's actions. The pattern is not identical; the Irish saint survives, unlike the fourth century martyr. Furthermore in contrast to Lucy, both Cranat and the Brigit of vernacular hagiography are the agents of their own maiming. Lucy's pain is inflicted by another. Given this pattern, it is likely that Cranat's deed is based directly on Brigit's and indirectly, through her, on Lucy's torture. The Irish saints take their place in a long line of christian self-mutilators who were, and remain, objects of devotion.<sup>28</sup> There is a strikingly sexual overtone to the accounts in *Bethu Brigte* and the Life of Cranat. Each saint maintains her virginity by literally penetrating her own eye sockets, symbolically enacting sex to preserve physical intactness. A temporary loss of sight saves the hymen forever.

<sup>25</sup> The legendary Congal Cáech was put out of the kingship of Tara after being blinded by bees according to the Old Irish law tract edited by T. Charles-Edwards, F. Kelly, *Bechbretha* (Dublin 1983) §31–3. The following historical examples are taken from the Annals of Ulster, where blinding is undoubtedly a euphemism for blinding and castration: Donnchad ua Céili († 1009); Braen mac Máel Mórda († 1018); Flaithbertach ua hEochada († 1020); Tadhg mac Gilla Pátraic († 1027); Donnchad mac Dúnlainge († 1036); Ruaidrí mac Taidg († 1036); Flann ua Máel Sechnaill († 1037); Niall ua Céilecáin and Tréinfher († 1044); Amalgaid mac Cathail († 1051); Ruaidrí ua Conchobuir († 1092); Áed ua Canannán († 1093); Flaithbertach ua hAiteid († 1094).

<sup>26</sup> Bullough et al, 'Sadism, masochism', 52–5.

<sup>27</sup> Examined in a late medieval context by S. Horner, 'The violence of exegesis: reading the bodies of Ælfric's female saints', in A. Roberts (ed), *Violence against women in medieval texts* (Gainesville 1998) 22–43; G. Ashton, *The generation of identity in late medieval hagiography* (London 2000) chapter 4, interestingly, but not altogether successfully, locates a female voice in these violent narratives.

Is this a plea for female freedom? It is worth examining the context of Cranat's actions. Her suitor, Cairpre Crom, was of Eóganacht Glendamnach, a dynasty that was eventually overshadowed by the more successful Eóganacht Chaisil. The former were at their height in the seventh and eighth centuries and in Cathal mac Finguine († 742) produced a king of Munster who dominated the island. The dynasty neighboured Fir Maige Féne and, even in decline, was a dangerous rival. One branch actually expanded into Fir Maige Féne, taking the name Eóganacht Fer Maige.<sup>29</sup> The Life of Cranat is opposed to Eóganacht Glendamnach interests, and Cairpre emerges as a pathetic figure who is eventually struck down by God. Cranat goes on to curse her colluding brother, Fínán, but is careful to promise that the sovereignty of Fir Maige will remain within his family and not pass away to strangers.<sup>30</sup> She also enforces the dues owing to her churches from Fir Maige.<sup>31</sup>

It is apparent that Cranat is used to bolster Fir Maige independence and increase church revenues. Her defence of virginity seems stereotypical—she never truly challenges male hierarchies. In fact, this text supports these hierarchies through Cranat's blessing of her people's kingship. Her miracles work in a patriarchal frame—other women would not have had the same miraculous options. Cranat's self-mutilation might be read as empowering, as stressing the saint's control over her own bodily integrity, but this interpretation is undercut by the perhaps purposeful hilarity with which the anecdote concludes. Her follower, Laithche, has to scrabble around in a tree to find one of the saint's eyes. She succeeds. However, bark adheres to the rescued eyeball and this gives Cranat a fierce look after she pops it back into its socket.<sup>32</sup> Rather than gazing out, Cranat's eye is subject to the bemused gaze of author and audience.

## CANIR

Potentially, the little-known Canir poses a greater challenge than Cranat to existing hierarchies. She was a saint of Benntraige in south Munster<sup>33</sup> and, if her association with Senán is anything to go by, she flourished in the sixth century. Senán was a major

<sup>28</sup> Bullough et al, 'Sadism, masochism', 53–7.

<sup>29</sup> D. Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin 1972) 3–5.

<sup>30</sup> *Miscellanea*, 161, § 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 161–62, §4

<sup>33</sup> The Benntraige were also scattered throughout Leinster; Canir's particular group have given their name to Bantry.

saint and his monastery, Inis Cathaig on Scattery Island in the Shannon Estuary, was a major church. Canir appears in an episode towards the end of his medieval vernacular Life. It bears the hallmarks of being an originally independent anecdote, particularly as Senán is not portrayed in the normal heroic light.

The episode describes how Canir, a holy virgin, is praying in her Benntraighe hermitage when she has a vision of all the churches in Ireland. A pillar of fire rises from each, but the highest blazes from Inis Cathaig and Canir decides that she wishes to die and be buried there. The saint travels north until she reaches the Shannon Estuary. This is no obstacle and she walks across water, only to be accosted just before landfall by an unwelcoming Senán. He refuses to allow Canir ashore, simply because she is a woman. Senán's overt misogyny is overturned by Canir in the following dialogue:

*'Ni thiagat mna a n-indsi-sea', ol Senán.*

*'Cid dia ta latsa sin?' ol Canir. 'Ni messa Crist, ar ni lugha thainic do thathcreic ban inás do thathcreic fher. Ni lugha roces ardaigh ban inás ardaigh fher. Robhatar mná oc umaloid 7 oc timterecht do Crist 7 dia aps[t]alaib. Ní lugha, dano, thiaghuit mna isin bhflaith nemhdha inait fir. Cidh, dano, arna gebhtha-sa mná cucat at indsi?' 'Is talchar atai', ar Senán.<sup>34</sup>*

'Women do not come to this island', said Senán.

'Where did you get that arrangement?' said Canir. 'Christ is no worse than you, for he came to redeem women no less than to redeem men. He did not suffer less for the sake of women than for the sake of men. Women have given humble service and ministration to Christ and to his apostles. Women then, no less than men enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Why, then, would you not take women to you onto your island?'

'You are stubborn', said Senán.

Senán acquiesces. Canir steps ashore, receives the sacrament from him, dies and is buried.<sup>35</sup> One of the most noteworthy aspects of this episode is the way Senán ignores Canir's walk across water, a miracle that marks her out as a saint and imitator of Christ. Instead it is her verbal abilities that convince the male saint and leave him, for all practical purposes, speechless.

<sup>34</sup> Stokes, *Lives of the saints*, 72–3, lines 2431–37.



Her words must be examined carefully. Early christian writers commonly argued that women should remain silent—a talkative woman, it was believed, would open more than her mouth and could lure unsuspecting men into sin.<sup>36</sup> Canir’s verbal adroitness, on the contrary, is sinless. Her speech draws on a frequently overshadowed strand of christian thinking, one that stressed that all believers were equal before God regardless of whether they were men or women. The dichotomy between these more radical notions and typical misogyny goes back to the writings of St Paul,<sup>37</sup> and a christian anti-misogynist literature was developed throughout the Middle Ages. It offered a challenge to official ideologies, even if it never became dominant and was, in some circles, regarded as a curiosity.<sup>38</sup> Canir fits into this tradition. Nevertheless, the expression of her dissent ultimately fails to subvert the status quo; she suggests that the role of women is one of *umaldóit 7 timthirecht* ‘humble service and ministration’ to Christ, his apostles and, by analogy, male clerics. Canir’s soul may go to Heaven, like any man’s, yet her work on Earth is different and smacks of subservience. Senán’s extreme position is rejected in favour of a more subtle model, one that stresses the separate spheres proper to male and to female. This was the most common rebuttal, offered by men as well as women, to the charge of female inferiority. It was a rebuttal with a sting in the tail: women were different but equal but men were even more equal.

These are not the only implications. Canir demands burial on a holy island, inhabited by men. The holy island is common in literature and was well-known in both text and practice to early christians, including the Irish.<sup>39</sup> However, the Irish development of it as a literary theme is unusual, drawing creatively on Classical works, christian texts and native traditions. Canir’s speech intersects with a common Irish trope—the islands of women that populate the otherworld.<sup>40</sup> The all-female island which welcomes male adventurers is reversed in this case; Canir is initially refused entry to an all-male island. This refusal highlights Senán’s lack of hospitality, a lack that is condemned. This condemnation is a partial not a blanket one. Senán is right to be

<sup>35</sup> Bitel, *Land of women*, 201, wrongly concludes that Canir is successfully sent away by Senán.

<sup>36</sup> J. Salisbury, ‘Gendered sexuality’, in *Handbook of medieval sexuality*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> Note Paul, Gal. 3:28 in contrast with Col. 3:18; discussion by W. Walker, ‘1 Corinthians 11:12–16 and Paul’s views regarding women’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 94 (1975), 94–110.

<sup>38</sup> Examined in A. Blamires, *The case for women in medieval culture* (Oxford 1997).

<sup>39</sup> See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Island monasteries, christian’, in W. M. Johnston (ed), *Encyclopedia of monasticism*, Volume 1 (Chicago 2000) 669–73.

afraid of the temptations offered by most women because his island is characterised by virginity and chastity, unlike the all-female otherworld islands which were thought to be places of sexual licence. Despite Canir's success, the episode maintains an implicit contrast between the pure island of Senán and the sinful islands of women. Gender hierarchies are not over-turned. Canir's success is unique and her victory pyrrhic, for she does not open the way to other women and, by accepting the sacrament from Senán, implicitly supports the exclusivity of male sacramental authority. Still, it is arguable that her stout self-defence preserves genuine female voices. Christian women were known to argue in the type of terms used by Canir.<sup>41</sup> Female sanctity is acceptable, even if it is not quite up to the male mark.

## CONCLUSIONS

These two saints operate within constricting male worlds and respond to these constrictions in very different ways. Cranat acts on her own body; she refuses male sexual penetration by symbolically penetrating her own eyes and tearing them out. The saint's physical intactness is reinforced when she replaces her eyes, emblematic of her unbreached hymen. She is miraculously safe from the King of Munster's sexual advances. On the contrary, Canir speaks, opening her mouth and not her eyeball. Her eloquence is holy rather than garrulous and she wins the debate with Senán. So both women triumph and yet, neither victory is uncomplicated. Cranat underpins male-dominated society by blessing the kingship of Fir Maige Féne and, while Canir out-argues Senán, she presents a world-view where women serve and men act. Once again patriarchal structures emerge victorious. Cranat's support for them is the more encompassing and it is difficult to locate any real female input into her legend. In contrast, Canir's defence of women is part of a medieval christian tradition that was expressed by women as well as men and is one that is more likely to bear the imprint of female aspirations or audiences. But, these and all audiences lived under the sometimes longer, sometimes shorter, shadows of christian misogyny. Long or short the shadows were inescapable.

<sup>40</sup> The otherworld island is a feature of both the *echtrae* 'otherworld adventure' and *immram* 'voyage tale' genre. A key example is discussed by P. Mac Cana, 'The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*', *Ériu* 27 (1976) 95–115.

<sup>41</sup> Blamires, *Case for women*.