

Literary Cross-Pollination in Ireland in the 14th Century: A Case Study

The life and poetry of Gearóid Mc Gearailt, also known as Gearóid Iarla, Garret FitzGerald, or Gerald fitz Maurice FitzGerald (1338-1398), 3rd Earl of Desmond, offers a unique insight into literary influences in Ireland in the fourteenth century and the contradictory positioning of women as subjects by medieval authors. This essay will use one of Gerald's poems which has been translated to English,¹ *Woe to Him Who Slanders Women (Mairg Adeir Olc Ris Na Mnáibh)*, to demonstrate the influence of Continental literary arguments in Ireland, and in particular in Gerald's work. While multiple theories exist on potential literary influences and their significance/impact on literature in the Irish language, this paper will proceed with looking only at how continental literature on the defense of women was used by Gerald FitzGerald.² Gerald's uniqueness lies in the variety of continental source material he drew upon in his writing, which ranged from the often-documented French courtly love tradition to the continental defense of women.

Gerald fitz Maurice FitzGerald was born in Ireland, as the third son of the 1st Earl of Desmond in 1338 and was influenced in his writing through early and repeated exposure to Irish literature. Learning appears to have been a life-long pursuit for Gerald, who is described by scholars as a poet, mathematician, and magician.³ Gerald was not professionally trained as a poet. Most scholars contend that Gerald's poems survive because he was wealthy, rather than

¹ Most Gerald's poems remain as of yet translated. This poem can be found in Deane, Seamus, et al. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*. Field Day Publications, 1991. Vol. 4, p. 324-5.

² For a detailed summary of literary trends in Ireland over this period, see Cosgrove, Art. *A New History of Ireland Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534*. Oxford University Press, 2008. Chapters twenty-five "Literature in Irish, 1169-1534" and twenty-six "Literature in Norman French and English to 1534" are of particular value.

³ Cokayne, George Edward, *Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, Extant, Extinct, or Dormant. Volume III*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1890, pg. 84. Gerald is listed as the fourth earl in this source.

because he was exceptionally skilled.⁴ Gerald's Irish literary influences have already received scholarly attention. His exposure to Irish literature likely began at a young age, as his family patronized a hereditary line of Irish poets,⁵ with Gerald himself being the addressee of at least two poems by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh.⁶ Gerald may have also come to a more rounded view of Irish literature through his time as a captive, on two separate occasions by the Gaelic-Irish, first by the Mac Con Mara family in Thomond, then by Brian Ó Briain, also of Thomond.⁷ Gerald's medieval contemporaries also recognized his literary ambitions. A writer of *The Annals of the Four Masters*, a multi-century medieval chronicle, described Gerald as more familiar with Irish literature than either his English or Irish contemporaries.⁸ Though he was influenced by French literature, Gerald composed in Irish because Anglo-Norman French was on the decline in Ireland, having been relegated to legal texts by the increasing use of English as a result of both the rise in English nationalism thanks to the hundred years war and the legal imposition of English in the Statutes of Kilkenny.⁹

⁴ Carney, James. "Literature in Irish, 1169-1534." *A New History of Ireland: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534* by Art Cosgrove. Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 698.

⁵ Beresford, David and Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin. "FitzGerald, Gerald fitz Maurice ('Gearóid Iarla') 3rd earl of Desmond". *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. (ed.) James McGuire, James Quinn. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009. And: Niocaill, Gearóid Mac. "Fitzgerald, Gerald fitz Maurice, third earl of Desmond (1338?-1398), justiciar of Ireland and poet." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press. And: Carney, James. "Literature in Irish, 1169-1534." *A New History of Ireland: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534* by Art Cosgrove. Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 695-6.

⁶ The poems addressed to Gerald can be found translated to English in McKenna, Lambert. "Historical Poems of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh." *The Irish Monthly*, vol. 47, no. 547, Jan. 1919. Pg. 509-514 and 563-569.

⁷ Niocaill, Gearóid Mac. "Fitzgerald, Gerald fitz Maurice, third earl of Desmond (1338?-1398), justiciar of Ireland and poet." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004. Oxford University Press.

⁸ Ibid. And: McKisack, May. *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399*. Clarendon Press. 1959, pp. 233. And: *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*. trans. John O'Donovan. 2nd edition, vol. 4. Dublin, Ireland: Hodges, Smith, & Co. 1856, pp. 761.

⁹ Bliss, Alan, and Long, Joseph. "Literature in Norman-French and English to 1534" *A New History of Ireland: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534* by Art Cosgrove. Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 713. And: Kerby-Fulton, Kathryn. "Competing Archives, Competing Languages: Office Vernaculars, Civil Servant Raconteurs, and the Porous Nature of French during Ireland's Rise of English." *Speculum* 90:3 (2015), pp. 691. And: Butterfield, Ardis. *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War*. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. xxi and 236.

Irish literature was not Gerald's only influence, however; he also drew upon Anglo-Norman French medieval literary traditions such as courtly love and Arthurian romance. His father Maurice composed Anglo-Norman poetry, so Gerald was likely exposed to ideas present in that tradition from a young age.¹⁰ Gerald drew mostly from the courtly love traditions visible in lyric poetry and Arthurian romance.¹¹ Robin Flower views Gerald's contribution of Irish poetry in the French courtly style as the first of its kind, and so of critical importance for the genre, hence the frequent study of Gerald's poems within that context.¹²

While Flower has described Gerald's love poems as *amour courtois* done in the Irish style, neither Flower nor James Carney has closely analyzed Gerald's poems for connections to the continental defenses of women tradition. Continental authors writing in both French and Latin had a long tradition of viewing women as flawed or lesser than men.¹³ These reasons ranged from biblical to biological,¹⁴ and made female voices or characters in poetry remarkably one-dimensional.¹⁵ Various people also wrote in defense of women using similar arguments to

¹⁰ Beresford, David and Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin. "FitzGerald, Gerald fitz Maurice ('Gearóid Iarla') 3rd earl of Desmond". *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. (ed.) James McGuire, James Quinn. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009. And: Bliss, Alan, and Long, Joseph. "Literature in Norman-French and English to 1534" *A New History of Ireland: Medieval Ireland, 1169-1534* by Art Cosgrove. Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 719-720. And: Flower, Robin. *Dánta Grádha: An Anthology of Irish Love Poetry (A.D. 1350-1750)*. Dublin & Cork, 1926, pp. xiii.

¹¹ Flower, Robin. *Dánta Grádha: An Anthology of Irish Love Poetry (A.D. 1350-1750)*. Dublin & Cork, 1926, pp. xi. And: Bruford, Alan. "Gaelic folktales and medieval romances: A Study of the Early Modern Irish 'Romantic Tales' and Their Oral Derivatives" in *Béaloidéas*, xxxiv (1966) pp. 9-11.

¹² Flower, Robin. *Dánta Grádha: An Anthology of Irish Love Poetry (A.D. 1350-1750)*. Dublin & Cork, 1926, pp. xii.

¹³ Blamires, Alcuin., et al. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Clarendon Press, 1992. And: Bruford, Alan. "Gaelic folktales and medieval romances: A Study of the Early Modern Irish 'Romantic Tales' and Their Oral Derivatives" in *Béaloidéas*, xxxiv (1966) pp. 27.

¹⁴ "Responses to Antifeminism" *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 223.

¹⁵ Flower, Robin. *Dánta Grádha: An Anthology of Irish Love Poetry (A.D. 1350-1750)*. Dublin & Cork, 1926, pp. xxiii. And: Bruford, Alan. "Gaelic folktales and medieval romances: A Study of the Early Modern Irish 'Romantic Tales' and Their Oral Derivatives" in *Béaloidéas*, xxxiv (1966) pp. 34.

those used by the attackers.¹⁶ Gerald draws on both Continental traditions of defense and attack in his writing.

In this paper, I examine the treatment of female characters in one of Gerald's poems, *Woe to Him Who Slanders Women* (*Mairg Adeir Olc Ris Na Mnáibh*). I will demonstrate that while Gerald uses the Irish language and Irish poetic meter to make his arguments, the material he draws from originates mainly in the continental defense of women tradition.

After an initial stanza generally declaring that women do not deserve male slander or scorn, Gerald's poem shifts to defending women against specific slanders in the Continental style. In the second stanza, he addresses the value of women's advice to men and the pleasure listening to women's advice can bring to a husband's life. Women, Gerald argues, should not be slandered because "Sweet their speech and neat their voices."¹⁷ Two continental authors have used this same tactic to defend women from accusations of 'evil' speech and malicious advice, although one does so far more thoroughly than the other. *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, written in the late thirteenth century, contains an example of this argument where women's 'sweetness' is "soothing ill tempers both high and low."¹⁸ The good advice of women is physically embodied in the sweetly singing nightingale, compared to the lesser sounds of the slanderous thrush which "snipes away."¹⁹ Women's advice also finds a strong proponent in

¹⁶ Blamires, Alcuin, et. al. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended : an Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 223.

¹⁷ FitzGerald, Gerald. "Woe to Him Who Slanders Women" in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* by Seamus Deane et al. Field Day Publications, 1991. Vol. 4, line 5.

¹⁸ "The Thrush and the Nightingale" in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended : an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 225, verse 6, line 1.

¹⁹ "The Thrush and the Nightingale" pp. 224, verse 3, line 3.

Albertano of Brescia's *Book of Consolation and Advice*. The entirety of Albertano's defense is a point-by-point argument on the value of women's advice, although the most poignant argument lies in biblical examples of women's advice bringing about God's work.²⁰ Written in 1246, the fictional debate ends when Albertano has his nobleman character Melibeus realize his aptly named wife, Prudence's, advice is sound and worthwhile to listen to because "Eloquence is a honeycomb of sweetness; it is pleasant to the soul and gives health to the body. For through your good and sweet words and through my previous experience, I have recognized that you are wise and faithful to me and discerning, and so, having changed my opinion, I wish to act according to your advice."²¹ However, such sweeping triumphs as Albertano's are seen less often than close debates won with a single, usually biblical, argument closer to the style of *The Thrush and the Nightingale*. This is the first of many explicitly continental arguments that Gerald references in his poem in support of the declarative statements he makes in his first stanza.

The third stanza of the poem also supports a consciously continental posturing on the part of Gerald and anticipates many of the arguments which would form the basis of Christine de Pizan's revolutionary work *The Book of the City of Ladies*. What Gerald claims of women and what Christine will later elaborate on is that: "Treason, killing, they won't commit / nor any loathsome, hateful thing. Church or bell they won't profane."²² From where Gerald draws inspiration for this argument is difficult to trace, but its appearance in Christine's book anywhere between one and fifty years after Gerald wrote his poem indicates the argument was not original

²⁰ Albertano of Brescia. "Book of Consolation and Advice" in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 240-241, verse 7.

²¹ Albertano of Brescia. pp. 242, verse 11.

²² Gerald FitzGerald "Woe to Him Who Slanders Women" lines 9-11.

to either writer. Used in both Ireland and France, this argument also supports the same cross-cultural literary exchange which enabled Gerald to draw on Continental sources for inspiration in his other stanzas. As Christine phrases this defense argument:

If one judges the matter correctly, one will discover that the so-called
‘greatest evil’ is capable of doing little harm. Women do not kill anyone,
wound or torture them; they do not plot or carry out treacherous acts, they
are not arsonists, nor do they disinherit anyone, administer poison, steal
gold or silver, trick people out of their possessions or lawful inheritance,
through fraudulent contracts, nor harm kingdoms, duchies, or empires.
They are hardly a source of evil, not even the worst of them.²³

Gerald’s use of this defense and its later use by Christine de Pizan indicates a certain degree of cultural currency for such arguments on the continent.

Gerald’s fourth stanza takes on a distinctly religious tone which was prevalent in the French and greater continental tradition that he chose to emulate. This defense of women is based on women’s reproductive role in society and ties it to the birth of Jesus Christ. Gerald claims: “But for women we would have / for certain, neither kings nor prelates, / prophets mighty, free from fault.”²⁴ This refers to the most common medieval defense of women, that without women no one would be born, and more specifically, without the Virgin Mary there would be no Jesus Christ. This assertion is the coup de grace in the fictional debate of *The*

²³ Christine de Pizan “The Letter of the God of Love” in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 285, verse 11.

²⁴ Gerald FitzGerald “Woe to Him Who Slanders Women” lines 13-15.

Thrush and the Nightingale.²⁵ It also appears in Marbod of Rennes *The Good Woman*;²⁶ in Abelard's letter *On the Origin of Nuns*;²⁷ and in Albertano of Brescia's *The Book of Consolation and Advice*.²⁸ This argument is echoed in the modern censure "you wouldn't treat your mother like that." This defense's undeniable biblical example and its simple practicality made it a popular continental argument, and in most other cases it is used as the crowning rebuke of slanderous men, although Gerald takes his continental-based poem further in its censure of both men and women in the final two stanzas.

In the fifth stanza Gerald romanticizes women's fidelity, a trait frequently tied to religiosity in general and the resurrection of Christ in particular in the continental defenses. Gerald refers to the sufferings women have undergone out of love and loyalty as because "They are victims of their hearts."²⁹ This is taken in longer arguments to explicitly mean the weeping of Mary Magdalene at Christ's grave-side, her three days of suffering out of love and loyalty, which enabled her to be the first person to witness the Resurrection.³⁰ It was her 'heart's' suffering which was rewarded by being the first person to see the resurrected Christ, and in other women will be rewarded in heaven. Gerald's statement "They love a sound and slender man / - nor soon do they dislike the same,"³¹ expands this view of faith and fidelity from the narrow example of Mary into a much wider field to include other biblical characters, pseudo-historical

²⁵ "The Thrush and the Nightingale" pp. 227-8, verses 29-32.

²⁶ Marbod of Rennes "The Good Woman" in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 229-231, verse 3 and verse 6.

²⁷ Abelard "On the Origin of Nuns" in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 236, verse 7.

²⁸ Albertano of Brescia "Book of Consolation and Advice" pp. 238-239, verse 3.

²⁹ Gerald FitzGerald "Woe to Him Who Slanders Women" line 17.

³⁰ Abelard "On the Origin of Nuns" pp. 233-234, verses 2-3. And: Albertano of Brescia "Book of Consolation and Advice" pp. 238-239, verse 3. And: "The Southern Passion" in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 245, verse 1.

³¹ Gerald FitzGerald "Woe to Him Who Slanders Women" lines 18-19.

figures, and the generic husband. The rewards for this loyalty are unnamed, but that such fierce devotion exists is agreed upon by the majority of medieval authors writing in the defense of women. In *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, the Nightingale extolls women's loyalty in addition to other virtues.³² Other examples of women's devotion and the extremes it has carried to proliferate in the continental authors' defenses of women.³³ This loyalty becomes the lynchpin of female defense arguments on the continent. The lives of the two Marys through the repeated use of these arguments then come to define the ideal woman worthy of such stringent defense. Gerald's defense of women ends with this romanticization of their fidelity, which drew extensively from the continental defense tradition.

Gerald uses the last stanza of his poem to remind readers that there is a second continental tradition, based on attacking women's virtues, which he was also aware of. While Gerald's purpose in including an attack of women at the end of his poem for their defense is unclear, many of the same authors who wrote the defense arguments he drew upon previously in the poem also have an answer to this accusation, so it is possible it was intended as a further example of defense rather than the attack it can be read as. This stanza uses innuendo to comment on women's sexual behavior by claiming "Ancient persons, stout and grey, they will not choose for company, but choose a juicy branch, through poor."³⁴ Women were more inclined to weakness according to the continental authors, and this accusation was often addressed in defense arguments. The defense arguments against women 'choosing a juicy

³² "The Thrush and the Nightingale" pp. 225, verse 6 and verse 10.

³³ Marbod of Rennes "The Good Woman" pp. 230-232, verses 6-8. And: Abelard "On the Origin of Nuns" pp. 234-5, verse 4. And: Albertano of Brescia "Book of Consolation and Advice" pp. 239 and 240-241, verse 4 and verses 7-9. And: "The Southern Passion" pp. 245-246, verse 1-2.

³⁴ Gerald FitzGerald "Woe to Him Who Slanders Women" lines 21-23.

branch' ranged from biblical³⁵ to physical.³⁶ Which continental tradition Gerald's final stanza intended to draw upon is unclear, but that the argument itself originated in continental sources is undeniable.

Gerald fitz Maurice FitzGerald wrote poetry in the fourteenth century, writing in the Irish language using Irish poetic meters, but drawing inspiration from French and Latin continental sources. While the influence of courtly love poetry on Gerald's works has been well documented, other continental sources of influence have been largely untouched by scholars. Gerald's poem, *Woe to Him Who Slanders Women* (*Mairg Adeir Olc Ris Na Mnáibh*), serves as a good example of the continental defense tradition as used by Gerald. With the exception of the first stanza, with its generic declaratives, every stanza can be traced back to or tied with an argument from the continental defense of women tradition. This literary cross-pollination was no doubt aided and at times complicated by Gerald's own complex set of identity-markers as an Anglo-Norman English noble living in Ireland.

³⁵ Abelard "On the Origin of Nuns" pp. 235, verse 5.

³⁶ Marbod of Rennes "The Good Woman" pp. 229, verse 2. And: "Response to Richard de Fournival's Bestiary of Love" in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* by Alcuin Blamires. Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 243, verse 2. And: "The Southern Passion" pp. 246 and 247, verse 4 and verse 6.

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