The Transformative Nature of Gender:
The Coding of St. Brigit of Kildare through Hagiography

Liliane Catherine Marcil-Johnston

A Thesis

in

The Department
of
Theology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Theological Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

December 2012

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Liliane Catherine Marcil-Johnston

Entitled: The Transformative Nature of Gender: The Coding of St. Brigit of Kildare through Hagiography

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Theological Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Matthew Anderson

_____ Examiner
Dr. Christine Jamieson

_____Examiner
Dr. Jean-Michel Roessli

_____Supervisor
Dr. Pamela Bright

Approved by _____
Graduate Program Director

_____ 2012 _____
Dean of Faculty

Abstract

The Transformative Nature of Gender:
The Coding of St. Brigit of Kildare through Hagiography

Liliane Catherine Marcil-Johnston

This study examines how gender is portrayed in the hagiographic tradition surrounding St. Brigit of Kildare. In particular, it provides an in-depth look at how Brigit, as presented in her hagiographies, constantly undergoes gender transformations. These gender transformations are analyzed using material gained from a study of the way women were viewed in the early Medieval period, with an emphasis placed on how they were viewed in Ireland during the same period. A focus on the theology about women of the time, Irish spirituality and the theology behind it, as well as the conventions of hagiography and in particular the special characteristics of Irish hagiography are also offered.

Keyword: Brigit of Kildare, Hagiography, Irish Hagiography, Folklore, Medieval Ireland, Medieval Gender Theory and Theology, Gender Transformation.

Acknowledgements

There were a number of people who were a great encouragement to me during the writing of this thesis and have undeniably made it better by their unique contributions.

I would like to acknowledge the hard work and assistance of my thesis supervisor Dr. Pamela Bright. Dr. Bright was a great mentor throughout these two years and helped to guide me into a field of study I am tremendously enthusiastic and passionate about. I will be forever grateful for her expertise and invaluable guidance.

Many thanks also to the Department of Theological Studies at Concordia University. The department and the people in it have been supportive of my research and have been a tremendous part of my training in the field.

I am eternally indebted to Sara Terreault for all of the emails, conference calls and lunches where she provided me with great help and mentoring along with some laughs to keep me on my toes and without whom I never would have discovered Brigit.

A special thanks to Dr. Jean-Michel Roessli for his expertise and patience.

I will be forever thankful to Robert Smith who opened the doors of the department to me and gave me a none too gentle shove through them.

A big thank-you to Ashley Ma for all of her help with the technical difficulties I encountered.

I would like to thank my sister and last minute editor, Victoria Johnston who pulled an all night editorial session to help me get the final draft done.

A particularly large and heartfelt thank-you to Noah who has humoured, encouraged and was brave enough to propose to and marry me while I was in the midst of my studies.

Finally I want to extend my thanks and all of my love to my mother Dr. Suzanne Marcil without whom none of my academic endeavors would have been possible and who is a constant source of inspiration for me.

Dedication

To two great, strong and inspirational women:
my Nanna – Jackie G. Marcil – 1927-2012,
Dr. Pamela Bright 1937-2012

Table of Contents

Introduction

The women of past generations are often overlooked in history. The chronicling of human endeavours was for a long time a "boys' club". It was history about men, written by men. If women were written about it was as a footnote, usually highlighting the connection, either as a mother, sister or wife, between the woman and a great man. That is not to say that women were excluded completely; there are examples of extraordinary women being included in history such as Genovefa of Paris, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna and Simone Weil to name but a few. In Christianity, the number of great holy men outweighs the number of great holy women considerably. For example, in the *Dictionary of Irish Saints* by Padraig O Riain, of the five hundred and twenty saints, or so, listed as having a feast day, only around twenty of them are women. Thus, of the Irish saints known to have a feast day, only about five percent of them are women. The women that do make it into the collective Christian history are included as examples of ascetic virginity and martyrdom. Not every ascetic Christian virgin was canonized and immortalized in literature however. Those who were included in the literature of the time, entered into the male dominated world of hagiography and were there for a reason. When examining these individual cases, such as Blandina of Lyon, Perpetua of Carthage and Brigit of Kildare, the question to ask is why these women in particular were included? Beyond the fact that they were exemplars of Christian ascetic virginity, the stories of these women were preserved because of their gender and more precisely because of the transformative nature of their gender that allowed them to transcend cultural restrictions. What is meant here by the transformative nature of gender is the unique and ambiguous character of female gender, especially when it is being treated, and written about, by men, as well as the actual transformations themselves, where the women in question would cross the gender plane, leaving

the socially preconceived notions of female behind and enter into the world of male gender. By going beyond the socially dictated gender roles, these women and the men who wrote their *vitae* were making new roles for women.

The thesis that follows focuses on religious, social and anthropological issues relating to the gender of Brigit of Kildare as presented in her hagiographies. The question that prompted the writing of this thesis and that will be answered within the its' pages is: What is the nature of gender coding in St. Brigit of Kildare's hagiographies? It will be argued that the gender portrayal in the hagiographies of St. Brigit of Kildare, namely the *Life of Saint Brigit* by Cogitosus, the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* and the *Bethu Brigte*, is ambiguous, complex and ultimately definitive of the particularities of the Irish Christian context out of which they emerged. As a result of these ambiguous complex portrayals, the gender transformations present in the hagiographies create and are witness to inconsistencies within the understanding of the role of female saints in the early medieval period in Ireland. Through its deliberate inclusion of a theological perspective, this thesis focuses on a needed correction to the study of gender in the medieval period in general and in the case of Brigit in particular.

This gap in the study of gender was recently addressed in *The Times Literary Supplement*. In the May 18th 2012 edition, contributor Teresa Morgan reviewed Ross Shepard Kraemer's *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, gender, and history in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean*, a book that examines women in religion and the male authored texts that discuss women in religion. In her review, Morgan draws attention to some of the issues with Kraemer's book, in particular the lack of contextualization of the gender issue in a wider scope. Morgan writes: "If she (Kraemer) wants to use them to further our understanding of women's religious activities in general, she needs to contextualize them in a wider range of sources covering a

wider range of activities."[1] Another issue that Morgan finds in the way Kraemer approaches gender is the fact that the book does not offer a problematized account of femininity, something Morgan says should be included in a twenty-first century contribution to the history of women's religious practices.[2] Morgan writes of Kraemer's treatment of women:

> She (Kraemer) begins by explaining that she constructs "women" in an everyday modern sense, in which female (biological) sex and female (cultural) gender are taken to be convergent. This might have been acceptable thirty-five years ago, but it does not do justice either to Kraemer's own theoretical sophistication in other writings or to the current complexity of sex and gender theory.[3]

The issues which Morgan underlines are the same issues found in the study of women and gender in early medieval Christianity.

Research in gender studies typically engages the questions in the field through sociological, historical and/or literary approaches while explicitly neglecting theological perspectives. This is an ironic disciplinary deficiency, given that the primary sources used in studying the medieval period and especially gender in that period are usually either explicitly theological in nature or are written from a theological background. Certainly this is the case while studying Brigit, the sources for whom are primarily hagiographical and hence theological and spiritual in terms of their grounding worldview and their intention. In this thesis, the historical and sociological data will engage the theological questions and concerns inherent in the primary sources in particular Brigit's *vitae* and the writings of Church fathers. This is entirely in keeping with the inherently interdisciplinary nature of historical theological research.

The thesis will be presented in four content chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. In the first chapter: "Pre-Christian Ireland, Women and Christian Ireland" the many different contexts surrounding the study will be explained. First to be examined is the culture

---

[1] Teresa Morgan, "Unusual Women" in *The Times Literary Supplement* May 18th 2012, 26.
[2] Morgan, "Unusual Women" 26.
[3] Morgan, "Unusual Women", 26.

and religion of pre-Christian Ireland, the period dating before the mid 5th century. Next is a brief examination of Irish Christianity during the early Christian period, also known as the Founding Period of Celtic Christianity, spanning from the 5th to the 7th century, focusing in particular on the theological issues of the conversion of Ireland to Christianity. In addition the elements of Early Irish Christian theology will be explored, with attention to the foundational influences that shaped it, for example John Cassian's *Conferences* (365 – 435 C.E). Three paradoxes that shape early Celtic Christianity are explained at this point. Following this is an analysis of gender in the early medieval period. The chapter looks at how women were viewed, the prevailing medical theories of the time regarding the female gender and the role women had in early medieval Irish culture. It is in this chapter that the idea of gender transformation is first outlined. This idea will be explored using case studies of Blandina, a martyr of Lyon, late second century and Perpetua, a Carthaginian martyr, early third century.

The second chapter: "Saints and Hagiography" provides the theological context about the genre of hagiography and the cult of the saints. The first section of this chapter outlines the specifics and characteristics of the genre in general, while the second section of the chapter focuses on the specifics and characteristics of Irish hagiography. The third section in this chapter examines women in hagiography and how hagiographers adapted the genre when writing about female saints. Section four delves into the cult of the saints and juxtaposes it with the cult of the hero while drawing similarities between the two. The last two sections of the chapter examine the Christian typologies that were most often used in the writing of hagiographies: the typology of Jesus and the typology of Mary.

The third chapter, titled "Gender in Brigit's Hagiographies" outlines how gender is approached in Brigit's hagiographies. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the three

hagiographies in question. This is followed by examining how Brigit's hagiographers cast her as Jesus, as Mary, as a Celtic Folklore hero, and finally as a *Bean Feasa* and Sovereignty Queen. The chapter concludes with an examination of how these many roles Brigit is cast in by her hagiographers compare to other notable Christian gender transformations and how they impact the study of Brigit.

The final chapter, chapter four: "Brigit Today" examines how the cult of Brigit has survived in modern times and how Brigit is appropriated and venerated by different groups. This chapter includes sections on the feminist appropriation of Brigit, the Celtic appropriation of Brigit and Brigit in popular culture.

All of the religious, social and historical issues detailed in this thesis integrate to form the complex ideal of gender, and in particular female gender in the early medieval Irish Christian worldview. No matter what approach is taken to examine gender; the other scholarly approaches are reflected because gender pervades all levels of scholarly inquiry.

Chapter 1: Pre-Christian Ireland, Women and Christian Ireland

In order to understand and analyze Brigit (c. 451-525 CE), it is important to understand the world she lived in. During Brigit's life and ministry Christianity was still a young religion and Ireland was still very much in the process of conversion. This means that there were still a number of elements from pre-Christian Ireland that impacted the emerging Irish Christian community. Since the Christian religion was new – both in the world and in Ireland – it is important to take note of and discuss the influences and literature from the continent with which the Irish would have been familiar. Given that gender is a pivotal part of this thesis, it is important to highlight the ways society and religion impacted the views on women, both in pre-Christian Ireland and Christian Ireland. A detailing of the coming of Christianity to Ireland will also be provided.

The Society of Pre-Christian Ireland:

When studying the pre-Christian world of Ireland it is essential to start off by shedding some light on the question: Who are the Celts? The Celts, or as Julius Caesar called them the *Galli,* are an almost indefinable large grouping of people who spread throughout the known world. It is believed that there might have been a Celtic presence as early as 800 BCE in and around Middle Europe.[4] It is difficult to know for sure however for a few reasons. One of the main reasons is that this group of people did not leave any written sources of their own; everything known about them, even their name – *Galli* – comes from people writing about them. Something that scholars are confident about when studying the Celts is that Caesar's Gauls, the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland, the Polish Celts, Spanish Galicia and St. Paul's Galatians have linguistic and cultural affinities.[5] This group is what is now generally referred to as the Celts.

---

[4] Andrew J. Foley. "Shadows from the Celtic Past among the Irish in America." *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 289.
[5] Foley, "Shadows from the Celtic Past." 290.

The branch of this large and amorphous group which will be examined in this chapter are the Irish Celts for it is the world of the Irish Celts, from here on referred to as pre-Christian Ireland, that were Brigit's direct ancestors. Their society was based upon a clan model. The clan or *fine* as it is also known was a patrilineal descent group that spanned on average four generations.[6] The clan was valued as being very important, even more important than the individuals who made up the *tuatha* (the people of the clan).[7] These clans were the backbone of the pre-Christian Irish society. The clan names generally came from the names of their warrior king leaders.[8] For example, the U'Neill clan, later known as the O'Neil family, was a very prominent clan that featured in Brigit's *vitae*.

Due to the strength of the clan system of society, the land use of Ireland was different from that of the rest of Europe. Since everything was centered on the clan and Rome had not invaded Ireland, there were no networks or urban centers in Ireland when Christianity arrived.[9] This lack of power centers dictated the way in which pre-Christian Irish society was held together. It was ties of mutual obligation and dependency that held Irish society together before the coming of Christianity.[10] For the pre-Christian Irish, a person's wealth was of a portable nature and was measured in accordance with the Brehon Law which measured out the values given to people in the society, values that were based on the number of cattle they were worth, their honour price.[11] This world of kinship ties and honour prices was the world in which Brigit started her ministry.

---

[6] Foley, "Shadows from the Celtic Past." 292.
[7] Foley, "Shadows from the Celtic Past." 293.
[8] Lisa M. Bitel. *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 2.
[9] Michelle P. Brown. *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006), 89.
[10] Simon James. *Exploring the World of the Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 154.
[11] Foley, "Shadows from the Celtic Past among the Irish in America." 293.

The Religion of Pre-Christian Ireland

In the popular mind, the religion of pre-Christian Ireland is often focused on the druids. The druids were a class of professional priests, jurists, doctors and bards, both male and female, whose role was to preserve group memory and culture and pass it down through the generations and they also administered tribal law and maintained the calendar.[12] It is however difficult to pinpoint information about the druids with any certainty since they left few if any identifiable archaeological traces.[13] The lack of material archaeological evidence paired with a lack of written records results in the druids' being open to interpretation in both scholasticism and popular culture and has also allowed them to be cast as somewhat of a stereotype of Irish and Celtic religion.

The druids are by no means, however, the dominant element of pre-Christian religion in Ireland. This society was also marked by their deities. The Celts were polytheistic, similar to many early cultures at the time; however they did not have a universal pantheon.[14] Despite not having a universal pantheon, as the Greeks and Romans did, the Celts did have a "head" god. Dagda (pronounced 'dada') was also known as the 'Lord of Great Knowledge' or the 'Good God' and was closely associated with fire.[15] A polytheistic religion with a paternal god at the head aligned the Celts with the Greeks and the Romans, but their many triads of gods made for a possible link with Christianity. These triad gods were either three aspects of one god or a three faced god.[16] The religion of pre-Christian Ireland also held a belief in the afterlife. It was believed that there was a possibility of rebirth in the afterlife, a belief that led to

---

[12] Brown, *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland*, 18, James, 90.
[13] James, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* 90.
[14] James, *Exploring the World of the Celts,* 88.
[15] Brown, *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland,* 19.
[16] James , *Exploring the World of the Celts,* 89.

poorly defined barriers between the world of the living and the world of the dead.[17] These undefined barriers between the two worlds was likely beneficial to the development of the idea of the saints, a group who were able to straddle the boundary between the two worlds. Another affinity between the pre-Christian beliefs and Christianity is the idea of intermediaries. In pre-Christian Ireland, the kings were viewed as the main intermediaries between the human and the divine.[18] These obvious connections and possible sources of transition between the Celtic religion and Christianity, though important, are not the most central connections when studying Brigit.

The most significant area of intersection between the pre-Christian Irish religion and Christianity, when studying Brigit, is the goddess Brigid. The pre-Christian goddess Brigid/Brigit, whose name means the "High One", was the goddess of fertility, poetry, healing, and smiths, such as metal smiths.[19] Her pastoral festival was Imbolic, held February 1st, the same as Saint Brigit's.[20] Despite these overt similarities, it is also reputed that many of the traditions associated with the goddess Brigit are similar to the traditions associated with Saint Brigit. The highlighting of these similarities and connections are not meant to suggest that Saint Brigit and her cult appropriated the idea of the goddess Brigid and all of her cult's trappings in order to enable the transition from pre-Christian times to Christian times easier. Nor is the underlining of these points intended to imply that Brigit the holy Christian woman never existed and was just an appropriation of the Celtic goddess of the same name by the Christian Church. To suggest such things weakens not only the study of Brigit of Kildare but it also weakens Brigit herself and the legacy which she left. Attention is called to these points of connection and possible crossover

[17] James, *Exploring the World of the Celts* , 90.
[18] James, *Exploring the World of the Celts* , 90.
[19] Brown, *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland,* 20.
[20] Brown, *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland,* 20.

between pre-Christian goddess Brigid to St Brigit and more generally from pre-Christian religions to Christianity, in general in order to illustrate the complexity of the religious framework that existed when the Christian missionaries came to Ireland.

The Irish Conversion to Christianity:

Much like in other parts of the world, the coming of Christianity to Ireland had a profound and widespread impact. As scholar Lisa M. Bitel states in the introduction to her book *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian community in Early Ireland,* Christianity brought to Ireland the "religion of Roman sensibilities" to a place Rome had never invaded and an "urban ecclesiastical ideal" to a rural area.[21] The exact date of the arrival of Christianity in Ireland is not known for sure. Historian Simon James puts the date at around 400, but it is possible to argue for the more traditional dating of 431, the year that Palladius was sent to Ireland by the Pope.[22]It should be noted however that Palladius was sent as *primus episcopus* - "head bishop" – seeming to support that a Christian community already existed. Though Palladius was one of the first missionaries to be chronicled, there were probably many before him who spear-headed the conversion movement and those after who helped it grow. Patrick of Armagh, one of Ireland's patron saints along with Brigit and Columba,[23] is next in the line of notable Christian leaders in Irish history.

Patrick's mission marks the beginning of what is generally referred to as the high period of Christianity in Ireland. Before Patrick, there was no written history, only legends and tales.[24] It is Patrick's own writings – his *Confessio* and *Letter to the soldiers of Coroticus* – that are some

---

[21] Bitel, *Isle of the Saints,* 1.
[22] James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, 162.
[23] It is interesting to note that on the cover of O Riain's *Dictionary of Irish Saints,* these three saints are pictured. They are shown, as they often are, with Columba on the left, Patrick in the middle and Brigit on the right. There is a stain glass window in St. Brigit's cathedral in Kildare that depicts the three of them and has the same composition. One possible explanation for this is that Patrick, Brigit and Columba are viewed as a sort of Trinity of the Irish Church and Irish Saints.
[24] James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, 153.

of the earliest texts of the Celtic Church. It is through his writings that scholars learn about his life and the religious family tradition he was born in and his conversion activity among the Irish, which was mainly in the North, thus showing Patrick to be primarily a missionary bishop and not a missionary-monk.[25] According to his 7th century hagiographers, Muirchu who wrote *Vita sancti Patricii,* and Tirechan, Patrick established himself at Armagh, a site close to the pre-Christian royal site of Navan (similar to how Brigit established herself next to Dun Ailinne, another royal site) and within a century or two, Armagh had developed into one of the monastic power centers of Ireland under the patronage of St. Patrick. Though Patrick brought in the high period of Christianity in Ireland, it was the monks and the monasteries, all part of Ireland's strong monastic character, who acted as key players in the rest of the high period, a period that is traditionally dated to be from the 5th to the 8th centuries.

It could be said that Irish monasticism stands as the representative of what Christianity in Ireland became during the early medieval period. With its unique character, Irish monasticism shaped Irish history and left a lasting impact. Influenced greatly by the Desert Fathers of Egypt and their monastic tradition, in particular the ascetic lifestyle, Irish monks would have been familiar with much Desert Fathers' literature including Athanasius' *Life of Antony,* and John Cassian's *Conferences.*[26] The influence that Cassian (c. 360 – 435 CE), and his work had on Irish monasticism is reflected in the monastic writings, such as hagiography, and Brigit's *vitae* are no exception. Cassian wrote his *Conferences* as a set of guidelines on how to live the good Christian life for monks, written by a monk.[27] One of the guidelines that Cassian spends two "conferences" discussing is prayer. One of the important aspects about prayer that Cassian highlights is the need for ceaseless prayer. Cassian clearly states that a monk is to have total, uninterrupted

[25] Brown, *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland* , 69-70.
[26] Edward C. Sellner, *Stories of Celtic Soul Friends: Their Meaning for Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 42.
[27] Colm Luibheid, trans., *John Cassian: Conferences* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1985), xiii.

dedication to prayer.[28] In other words, being a good monk and leading a good Christian life meant praying all the time. This idea is present in Brigit's hagiographies where she is often shown to be praying ceaselessly. Cogitosus writes of Brigit that: "When her mind was absorbed in meditation upon heavenly things, as was her regular custom (…)"[29] and "While in her chariot she was praying to her Master in contemplative meditation, as was her practice, living a heavenly life on earth."[30] Both of these examples illustrate two interesting points. First it shows how Brigit's hagiographers, being monks, were influenced by John Cassian's writings and the stress Cassian put on ceaseless prayer. Secondly, these passages illustrate Brigit living the holy life through her many acts of ceaseless prayer.

Since Irish monasticism was basing itself on the Egyptian model, the mobility of people and ideas was important to the monks. It was the movement of people and ideas that helped the principles of Desert Monasticism in leaving Egypt, moving through Gaul and going on to inspire both the Irish and British church.[31] Through the study of the monastic source it is possible to see how present travel was for these communities, as necessary for the import and export of ideas.[32] The sharing of ideas proved essential to Irish monasticism since there was no specific monastic rule that they lived by; the monks were free to interpret the monastic ideals, brought to them through their travels, in their own way.[33] The idea of travel was so ingrained in the Irish version of monasticism that a study of the pilgrimage aspect of the monastic spiritual life is indispensable. The *peregrinatio* – pilgrimage in Latin – was a single-minded search for God on

[28] John Cassian, *John Cassian: Conferences,* ed. Colm Luibheid, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1985), 101.
[29] Cogitosus, 13:2.
[30] Cogitosus, 17:2.
[31] Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1972), 83.
[32] Bitel, *Isle of Saints,* 7.
[33] Bitel, *Isle of Saints,* 7.

earth.[34] A monk could undertake two different types of pilgrimage: a spiritual one that could be achieved in his cell or a physical bodily pilgrimage that meant travelling far from home in order to remove earthly ties and be free for God. [35]These examples illustrate how influential and characteristic travel was to the monasticism that emerged from Ireland.

Another characteristic of monasticism in Ireland is the connection to the founding saints. It was generally understood and well promoted by the monks and the monasteries that the monks were the community's connection with the founding saints. The monks were viewed as the spiritual, material and often actually blood heirs to the saints.[36] The monks were to carry on the work of Christ in Ireland and serve as the connection between the layperson and the continuing powerful presence of founding saints – like Patrick, Brigit and Columba. Due to this living legacy, the lifestyle of the monasteries and lay congregations were considered to be a manifestation of perfection on Earth.[37]

Even though the monks were considered to be the keepers of the saints' history and legacy, their duties to the past did not end there. It could be said that in a way the monks were also the keepers of the pre-Christian past. As mentioned above the coming of Christianity brought with it the coming of literacy. Before Christianity arrived in Ireland, nothing was written down, all of the legends and tales being passed orally through generations by the druids. This all changed once Christianity started to take root in Ireland. Within the first hundred or so years of Christianity being in Ireland the early monks started writing down the native language and thus preserved it.[38] Examples of this are found in the folktales from pre-Christian Ireland that the monks copied from the oral versions into written ones, preserving them for centuries to come.

---

[34] Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England.* 89.
[35] Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity.* 89.
[36]Bitel, *Isle of Saints,* 12.
[37]Bitel, *Isle of Saints,* 11.
[38]Bitel, *Isle of Saints,* 4.

The monks soon started copying native laws and folklore and went even further by incorporating many characteristics of folklore into their original writings such as hagiography.[39] More will be said on the connection between hagiography and folklore in chapter three.

The Three Paradoxes of Celtic Christianity:

The Christianity that was established and flourished in Ireland and the rest of the Celtic world is often represented by just Patrick, or the monks, or both. It should be noted, however, that Christianity from that corner of the world can be defined by three paradoxes. The three paradoxes are as follows: first, the earliest Irish conversions being characterized by continuities rather than discontinuities, second, the characteristic asceticism of Irish/"Celtic" Christianity coinciding with a love of nature, the arts and scholarship, and third, the insular culture being open to outside influence and in turn exerting its own influence beyond its shores.[40] The first paradox - the presence of continuities rather than discontinuities characterizing the earliest conversions - highlights incorporation and inclusion. Instead of breaking completely with the pre-Christian past (i.e. culture and religion) the early conversions to Christianity, (the conversions during the founding period of "Celtic" Christianity marked by such saints as Patrick, Brigit and Columba), kept many aspects of the pre-Christian past and incorporated them into the new culture and religion that was emerging from Christianity. Through the incorporation of folklore in monastic writing, in particular in hagiography, the monks were creating continuity with the long cultural past rather than an abrupt discontinuity through the novel features of Christian culture.

The second paradox, the love of nature, art and scholarship in a society marked by the asceticism of their religious institutions showcase three characteristics of the early Christian Irish

[39]Bitel, *Isle of Saints,* 4. & G.H Doble, "Hagiography and Folklore" *Folklore,* Vol 54, no. 3 (Sept 1943), 329.
[40] Sara Terreault, Lecture notes THEO 327: Celtic Christianity, Winter 2012 semester, Week 1 slides. January 2012.

culture. As has been mentioned, the monasticism that evolved in Ireland was one that was greatly influenced by the Desert Fathers; a group who in the popular mind are synonymous with severe ascetic practices. Despite the widespread reach of austere monastic practices that John Cassian and many others deemed as a "means to perfection" and "purity of heart", Irish monks responded with joy to their natural environment.[41] There was a strong respect and enjoyment of nature held by the monks that can be ascertained through the knowledge scholars have of monastic life and through monastic writings. Monastic scholarship and their appreciation and devotion to it are evidenced through the many works that survive to this day, for example, the *Book of Kells. The Book of Kells*, one of the most famous decorated manuscripts in the world, was laboured over for years by monks and is just one example of the many manuscripts of its type that was produced in the Celtic monastic setting. What is very interesting about this paradox is that the love of scholarship that monks illustrated through the creation of decorated manuscripts and hagiographies was a form of asceticism. As manuscript scholar Michelle P. Brown states, the work undertaken in monastic scriptoria was a physical expression of the devout and deep spirituality of an individual who undertook "this body-racking, muscle-aching, eye-straining task" to produce a labour of love that would connect them with their maker.[42] This passage clearly illustrates how monastic scribes combined their asceticism with their love of scholarship and art.

The third paradox of Celtic Christianity is embodied by the so-called insular culture. This paradox highlights that way in which, despite the geographical insular nature of the Celtic world

---

[41] Cassian, 40-42.

[42] Michelle P. Brown, "Introduction: Setting the Scene" *The Lindisfarne Gospels – Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 4. It is interesting to note that decorated manuscripts as examples of asceticism in the Celtic monastic tradition can be paralleled with the creation of icons, which was also viewed as an ascetic practice, in the Eastern European tradition. Both the Celtic and the Eastern European traditions were influenced by the Desert Fathers tradition and as such the making of decorated manuscripts and icons are two different manifestations of the same principle, that of asceticism.

and of Ireland in particular, the Christianity that grew there was greatly influenced by outside sources and also exported its own influences abroad. An example of this paradox is the influence that the Desert Fathers had on Irish monasticism. Given the huge geographical distance and the limited modes of transportation available, it is surprising to see how accessible the literature about desert monasticism such as Athanasius' *Life of Antony* and John Cassian's *Conferences* was.[43] This access to the outside world also meant that their influence could spread outside their insular setting, which it did. Understanding the paradoxes that surround Celtic Christianity is important to understanding the context in which Brigit lived and the context in which her hagiographies were written.

The Role of Women in the Christian Conversion

Even though women were mostly excluded from the writings of Irish Christianity in the early medieval period, they were by no means passive bystanders to the conversion process. As is the case in all types of regime changes throughout history, women play an important role. Genetic studies suggest that women rarely migrated or invaded new territories.[44] Women stayed where their families were and dealt with the invading cultures. Since they were stationary and they held the key to reproduction, women were needed to complete the assimilation of cultures and ethnic groups to make new kingdoms.[45] The power of reproduction when coupled with inter-marriage meant that if the women of an invaded culture could be assimilated, their children would be born members of the new regime. When Christianity came to Ireland, the same rule applied. If women were converted, the chances of their converting their male kin and of their children being born Christian were very high. As such, women helped to introduce and organize

[43] Sellner, *Stories of the Celtic Soul Friends*, 42.
[44] Lisa M Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 46.
[45] Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100*, 46.

Christianity in Ireland.[46] The impact women had on Christianity and its expansion, though crucial, was nonetheless impacted by the views and ideas regarding women of that period.

Ideas of Women and Gender in the Early Medieval Period

Further contextual information is needed to study Brigit's gender in her hagiography, in particular, information about gender. The early medieval views of gender are very different from the ones held by popular opinion today. To begin with, according to modern sensibilities, questions of gender were not articulated by the people of the early medieval period.[47] Societal norms dictated that the two sexes were defined by biological differences, and sex and gender was for a long time historically the same thing.[48] Gender, as it is perceived today, is based not on the biological differences but on the social roles assigned to the sexes that are deemed appropriate.[49] The intellectuals of the society of Brigit's time did not spend time pondering what it meant to be a woman or a man. This may be because the intellectual elite of early Ireland were a homogeneous group of usually monastically educated freemen and monks.[50] Despite the rather limited spectrum of the membership of the intellectual elite, there were a wide range of images of women, opinions about women and rules and laws about women.[51] In other words, the information about women was vast and always changing, there was no stagnant norm.

The majority of the information about women and the societal views on gender from the early medieval period came from the three genres of texts. These texts that dealt with the topic of women were laws of status and contract, wisdom texts and secular narratives.[52] The writers of these texts – the intellectual elite – advanced the view that women were physically, intellectually,

---

[46] Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100*, 58.
[47] Lisa M Bitel. "Do not Marry the Fat Short One: The Early Irish Wisdom on Women", 137.
[48] Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in *Gender & Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel & Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 34.
[49] Murray, 34.
[50] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 137.
[51] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 138.
[52] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 138.

emotionally and spiritually different from men.[53] Medically, women and men were viewed as having bodies that had a similar structure.[54] There were even some studies that went so far as to claim that the ovaries were internalized testicles and the uterus and vagina was an inverted penis.[55] Other theories classified women as 'other'. This classification as 'other' meant that women did not even originate from the same world as men but instead came from the 'otherworld', a place where nonhumans (i.e. fairies, changelings) and animals came from.[56] Thus for early medieval intellectuals, women were something they did not fully understand and as such were objects of fear. Thus men sought ways to define their behaviour and thus perhaps control them.

As a result of this debate over their nature, women were confined to traditional social roles and deprived of being able to own property or participate in the structures of society because of their theoretical physical inferiority.[57] This inferiority did not start from birth, but instead came into being as the woman matured. In her article "Do not Marry the Fat Short One" Lisa M. Bitel argues that in early medieval thought, everyone – both men and women – were born genderless.[58] As the person matured and acquired their "maleness" and "femaleness" around the age of 14, the boys became men and thus fully human whereas the more femaleness developed and the girls became women, the more they became less like men physically and thus legally and socially, falling into the realm of "other"/not fully human. The intellectual elite created a legal definition of women that was derived from their kinsmen, meaning that a woman always needed a man to act for her, thus ensuring that the respectable life goal for women was to

[53]Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 138.
[54] Murray, 36-37.
[55] Murray, 37.
[56]Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 138. See also Murray 37.
[57]Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 139.
[58]Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 141-142.

get married and have children.[59] Since women had little legal standing on their own, it created a need for them to get married so they could be members of society. If for some reason however, a woman chose not to fulfill her birthright by marrying and living the traditional life, it was a shock to the community and caused controversy for all those involved. As Lisa M Bitel writes: "Their parents and brothers were often furious when noblewomen refused the bridegrooms chosen for them. Monenna, Samthan, Ite and Brigit all waged emotional battles with kinsmen in order to escape destinies as wives and political links in alliances between different kin-groups."[60] In order to not marry but still be part of the society, some women had to change who they were by denying their "femaleness", often doing so in the setting of a religious life.

As has been illustrated, marriage was of the utmost importance to women since their societal worth was measured by using the norm of a free adult male. Since marriage was a necessity for society to function and there were many varied opinions about women, instruction guides were written about how to choose a good woman.[61] Bitel introduces us to these guidelines that outline the common virtues a "good" woman would possess as opposed to those of a "bad" woman. Among the numerous virtues listed for a "good" woman: common sense, modesty, honesty, purity, excellent Irish (well spoken-ness) and intelligence.[62] A "bad" woman on the other hand was characterized by wretchedness, vanity, laziness, lustfulness, folly and treachery.[63] With the help of these guides, it was assumed that men would be able to pick a "good" woman as a wife and in a way predict the usually unpredictable behaviour of a woman.

Even though becoming a wife was the most common and for a long time the most socially accepted option women had, there was one other avenue they could pursue in a Christian

[59] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 140.
[60] Bitel, *Isle of the Saints,* 104.
[61] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 147.
[62] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 147.
[63] Bitel, "Do not Marry the Fat Short One", 147-148.

society; they could enter into the religious life. By entering into the religious life, women were leaving the option of marriage and childbearing behind them and embracing the life of a virgin. In early Christianity, there was a high value placed on maintaining virginity, an opinion that was endorsed by Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397 CE). In a letter he wrote to his sister that dealt with virginity, Ambrose writes that virginity was something that was brought from heaven and as such it should be imitated on earth.[64] For Ambrose, those who abstained from carnal pleasure achieved a state where they were holy in body and soul and as such, virginity should be praised.[65] When a person, women in particular, chose to maintain their virginal status – something that was best achieved by entering into the religious life – they were accepting what Ambrose termed "a gift of only a few."[66] Maintaining their virginity and entering into a religious life was deemed as a gift only bestowed upon a few because to do so often meant challenging social norms – people had to get married to have children and ensure the continuation of society – but it also meant having to fare for themselves economically and politically, thus essentially fighting to survive in the material world as well as fighting the spiritual battle to maintain their virginity. It was a difficult task, one that had, as has been shown, both positive and negative elements that came with this gift, including a new set of views and theories about gender.

As discussed above, gender and sex were usually linked as being the same thing and there were only ever two of them. In the world of religion and people entering into the religious life, a "third gender" started to appear more and more in documents of the medieval world.[67] This "third gender" was applied to the "virgos", eunuchs, saints and celibate monks and nuns, the

---

[64] Ambrose of Milan, "Concerning Virgins" in *Early Christian Spirituality* ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 85.
[65] Ambrose of Milan, "Concerning Virgins", 89.
[66] Ambrose, "Concerning Virgins", 92.
[67] Murray, 34.

people who moved away from the socially dictated gender roles.[68] This "third gender" was not without its issues however. There were many concerns about the non-generative nature of this gender.[69] Since the people who comprised the "third gender" had stepped away from socially dictated gender roles (i.e. getting married and reproducing) it meant that this gender did not have a purpose in nature.

The "third gender" was complicated even more by the idea of gender transformation and movement. The gender scale was viewed as having the passive weak female at one end of the balance and the active strong male at the other end.[70] In secular views of that time, movement along this scale was not encouraged. In the religious world, movement was possible and even encouraged. Throughout the middle ages male writers suggested to women that it was possible to move along the scale and thus become more spiritual and closer to the male end.[71] As gender sociologist Jacqueline Murray states in her essay "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?": "Women would become more virile, more manly and, by implication, more perfect, if only they would repress their female qualities."[72] This idea of transformation finds its roots in early Christianity.

According to many scholars, including historian Elva Johnston, both Jerome and Ambrose, two of the most renowned Church fathers, wrote about the transformation and transcendence of the female gender. Johnston states in her article *Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography* that Jerome and Ambrose argued that it was possible for highly ascetic virgins to transcend their feminine state and thus transform themselves – in the spiritual sense – into men.[73]

---

[68] Murray, 35, 41.
[69] Murray, 38.
[70] Murray, 38.
[71] Murray, 42.
[72] Murray, 43.
[73] Elva Johnston, *Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography*, 212.

This transformation provided the women with what was in essence a masculine soul. Ambrose touched upon the idea of transcendence in his letter to his sister titled "Concerning Virgins". One of the final pieces of advice Ambrose gives virgins is: "Virgins, take wings, but wings of the Spirit, so that you may soar above the vices if you desire to reach Christ."[74] Ambrose is telling virgins that in order to transcend gender in order to reach Christ, they have to embrace the spirit/Spirit – perhaps suggesting their newly attained masculine one and the Holy Spirit – something that can be accomplished by leaving their worldly sins and vices Eve left them as her legacy, behind.[75] This idea of ascetic virgins transcending their "femaleness" and earning a masculine soul is found in more explicitly religious writings about women, many of them before Brigit's time, and some that are before even Ambrose and Jerome's time.

Two such examples of holy ascetic virgins experiencing gender transformation can be found in the persons of Blandina, a second century martyr and Perpetua, a third century martyr. Blandina was a member of the band of martyrs known as the Martyrs of Lyon who were persecuted, tortured and killed for being Christians in Lyon France in 177 C.E. Their account was written down in letter form and sent to Christian communities in modern Turkey, and then preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea in Book V of his *Ecclesiastical History*.[76] The story of Blandina's martyrdom is important to the Christian theory of gender transformation because it is one of the earliest accounts where this transformation is witnessed. Blandina was perhaps only a young girl when she was martyred and it is written in the account that "(…) lest, Blandina, by

---

[74] Ambrose, "Concerning Virgins" 94.

[75] It should be noted that I had difficulty finding the sources where either Ambrose or Jerome were supposed to have argued for spiritual gender transcendence. I followed the citations and sources listed in the articles where this idea was presented directly back to both Ambrose and Jerome's texts and found nothing concrete and clear in terms of either of them outlining spiritual gender transformation. I feel that since many of the scholarly texts that outline this idea and attribute it to the Church Fathers are not written by theologians, there is a slight methodological hiccup in that they themselves are copying citations from other sources without going back to texts by Ambrose and Jerome to find the proof themselves.

[76] Charles Kannengiesser, "Introduction" in *Early Christian Spirituality* ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 5

reason of her physical frailty, would not be able to make such a bold confession of faith. But she was filled with such power, that even those taking turns to torture her in every possible way from morning till night had to admit defeat."[77] This passage shows how Blandina, who was frail physically (possibly largely due to the fact she was a woman) was able to overcome her frailty by being "(…) renewed in her vigor through her confession of faith."[78]

The transformation is not really complete here however. It is not until she is lashed to a stake near the end of her martyrdom that Blandina is seen to have fully transcended her female state. In her transformation, Blandina not only transcends her "femaleness", she is also transformed into a type of Christ. The following passage illustrates her gender transcendence:

> "She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross and continued to inspire with great enthusiasm those still struggling in the combat. In the midst of their anguish, through their sister it seemed to them that they saw with the eye of their bodies, him who was crucified for them (…)".[79]

Blandina's transcendence was not just from a "frail" female state to a stronger masculine soul, but her transformation was also a visual one for her fellow martyrs, turning her into a Christ figure, a form of salvation for them.

Perpetua was a third century young Christian noble woman who was arrested, tortured, persecuted and eventually killed for her religious beliefs. In the "Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas", an account detailing the martyrdom including parts written by Perpetua herself, there is a section where Perpetua recounts a vision she had where she undergoes a transformation.

---

[77] Charles Kannengiesser, "Early Christian Spirituality", 41.
[78] Charles Kannengiesser, "Early Christian Spirituality", 41.
[79] Charles Kannengiesser, "Early Christian Spirituality", 45.

Perpetua writes: "I was stripped of my clothing, and suddenly I was a man."[80] This recounting of her transformation is important for two reasons. The first reason why this account of transformation is important is because it happens after Perpetua has declared her faith publicly, has had a vision indicating that she will likely be martyred for her religion, has been freed of her earthly female bonds – her breasts stopped producing milk for her infant son and stopped hurting her – and has embraced her faith all the while maintaining her physical and spiritual strength. All of these events illustrate that by the time Perpetua experiences her transformation, she has moved along the scale, away from the weak female pole, closer to the strong active male pole. The second reason why this transformation is important is because she experienced it herself. In other accounts of gender transformation, like Blandina and Brigit (whose transformation will be discussed later) the woman in question does not experience the transformation, or record it. Thus Perpetua being aware of the transformation and writing about it classifies her transformation as different and illustrating that the idea of gender transformation was present in early Christian thought.

[80] Patricia Wilson-Kastner et al. ed. "The Martyrdom of Perpetua: A Protest Account of Third-Century Christianity" in *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church.* 24.

Chapter 2: Saints and Hagiography

Now that the historical and sociological context has been explored it is possible to clarify the important theological terms and elements surrounding the study of Brigit. This chapter will explain hagiography both in general terms and specifically Irish/Celtic terms, the cult of the saints, and the treatment of women in hagiography and other religious writings.

Hagiography:

The genre of hagiography, also known as *vita/vitae,* is a very complex art that reflects and incorporates many aspects of the religious and cultural context that produces it. Before an analysis of hagiography, all of its many conventions and the ways in which it intertwines with culture can be completed, it is important to have a proper understanding of what is meant by the term. Hagiography can be defined in many ways, depending on whether one is dealing with hagiography in the medieval sense or in the modern sense. Either way one decides to explain it, hagiography deals with the writings about saints, their *vita sancti*, or in lay terms their biography.[81] Most of the time, it was the monks and religious masters at cathedrals and monasteries who wrote about saints who were important to them.[82] Hagiographies and most religious writing about people can be classified in two categories.

The first category is contemporary texts. Contemporary texts are the more trustworthy type of texts because they were written during the time that the person in question was alive and the events described were actually happening, for example the martyr account of third century martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas.[83] The second type of text is those that are composed posthumously. These are, as the title indicates, written after the saint or religious person is dead,

---

[81] Dorothy Ann Bray, "Introduction" in *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints.* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992), 10.
[82] G.H. Doble. "Hagiography and Folklore," *Folklore* 54:3 (1943): 323.
[83] Doble, 323.

often much later and thus are not historically trustworthy because too much time has elapsed between the events described and the copying down of them.[84] Examples of this are the *vitae* of St. Brigit, all of which were composed at least 100-150 years after her death. Since so many of the *vitae* are classified in the second category, they tend to reflect the characteristics and values of the place it was written in more than they reflect the actual life of the saint.[85] In other words scholars learn more about the people preserving the material than about the subject of the material when studying hagiography.

There was a great flourishing of hagiography during the medieval period for a few reasons. First, from the late fifth century to the eleventh century, Christianity became the religion of Europe resulting in the founding of many long-lasting Christian institutions and traditions.[86] These institutions provided the monks with a place and a platform to write hagiographies. The monks mostly wrote about the saints that were important to their geographical location or institution (i.e. a church, monastery or monastic order founded by the saint). As a result of this the *vitae* of the saints became an important way to enhance the saint's reputation in surrounding communities, promote the cult of the saint to pilgrims and visitors who would in turn come to the institution to pay their respects.[87]In other words, the writing of a saint's *vita* and the promotion of their cult acted as the first touristic marketing tool by spreading the amazing stories about deeds performed by the saint in order to draw in visitors and pilgrims.

Having explored the origin of hagiography, it is possible to examine and highlight some of the many conventions associated with the writing of a *vita*, and in particular a *vita* from the medieval period. A first convention of medieval hagiographies is that they observed the values

[84] Doble, 323.
[85] Doble, 325.
[86] Bray, "Introduction", 9.
[87] Bray, "Introduction." 11.

that were inherent to the Church teachings.[88] The most commonly used values come the Sermon on the Mont found in Matthew 5 -7 and the two that made their way the most often into *vitae* are charity and being kind to people, in particular the poor. Medieval hagiographers also usually followed a pattern. The hagiography would be made up of a series of miracles based in a very loose biographical framework that started with an account of the saint's parentage and birth and ended with a death marked by miraculous features.[89] A more in-depth analysis of this pattern in comparison with a folkloric pattern is found later in this chapter.

Another motif of medieval hagiography is the placing of the saints as models of Christian living. The hagiographers showed saints to be larger than life Christians who had plentiful reserves of grace and righteousness.[90] They were also often compared to biblical figures and were invested with Christian virtues, such as humility, generosity, charity and wisdom to name but a few.[91] The saints were the heirs to Christ's mission and to that of the apostles and as such stood as intercessors between God and men.[92] Since the saints were so closely related to Christ and the apostles, miracles similar to those performed by Christ in the New Testament and by his apostles were stock material for the miracles performed by the saint.[93] It is very important to note that miracles were the main criteria for a saint's stature since they were manifestations and testimonies of the saint's holiness.[94] All of these components added up to the saints being viewed as heroic examples of Christian living. The idea of the saint as hero is important to understanding

---

[88] Dorothy Ann Bray. "The making of a Hero: The Legend of St. Patrick and the Claims of Armagh," *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 145.
[89] Bray, "The making of a Hero," 149. For examples of a saint's death marked by miraculous features see *VP* 129:2 in the Brigit tradition or *The Life of Patrick* by Muirchu Book 2 9-12 in the Patrick tradition.
[90] Bray, "Introduction", 10.
[91] Bray, "Introduction," 10.
[92] Bray, "Introduction," 10.
[93] Bray, "Introduction," 11.
[94] Bray, "Introduction," 11.

the cult of saints as well as the use of the folkloric hero in hagiography, which is another convention of hagiography.

Irish Hagiography:

Even though Irish hagiography follows the same conventions and principles as hagiography in general, there are certain attributes that make Irish hagiography stand out. One of the main characteristics of Irish hagiography is the way in which Irish hagiography represents the continuity between Christian Ireland and its pre-Christian past.[95] This tie is very important to Irish hagiography as a whole since it is also a main characteristic of Christianity in Ireland. Most Irish *vitae* were written in Latin, the earliest life being written in the mid 7th century, with the occasional one in Irish starting from the 9th century onwards.[96] Since the *vitae* were written by monks, hagiographies are the best source of material on Irish monasticism.[97]This is also because many of the early Irish traditional daily occupations, institutions, material environment and mentalities are present in hagiography.[98] In other words, Irish hagiography allows the modern reader a glimpse of the world that produced them.

The use of common characters, themes and styles in *vitae* helped to form a canon, and this is no less the case for Irish hagiography, where there is a distinct grouping of characters, theme, and styles that form the Irish canon.[99] Many of these features are presented by theologian Edward Sellner in his many books on Celtic saints and spirituality. Sellner compiled a list of characteristics of Celtic Christianity and Celtic Spirituality, as found in the literature of that period, which outlines seven important features, all of which are often reflected in hagiography.

---

[95] Kathleen Hughes. *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London: The Sources of History Limited, 1972), 245.
[96] Elva Johnston. "Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography", *Peritia* 9 (1995): 197-198.
[97] Bitel. *Isle of the Saints,* 10.
[98] Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*, 10.
[99] Bitel. *Isle of the Saints,* 9.

The first characteristic on Sellner's list is the innate love and respect Celtic Christians had for the physical environment. This feature is an example of the ever present connection between Christian Ireland and its pre-Christian past.[100] There was a strong emphasis placed on experiencing God in natural surroundings and in the special relationship people have with God's natural world, in particular animals. [101] This characteristic is highlighted in many *vitae*, including Brigit's, through such scenes as her hanging her cloak on a rainbow, or incorporating animals into her miracles, such as the episode involving a cunning fox. This characteristic also draws attention to the second paradox of Celtic Christianity as outlined above, the love and appreciation of nature in a lifestyle often characterized by asceticism.

The second characteristic on Sellner's list is the love of learning of the Celtic Christians. This love of learning, as showcased in the flourishing of monastic schools and scriptoriums,[102] was often in evidence in saints' *vitae,* although not in Brigit's however. While there are no direct references to the love of learning in the stories of Brigit's life, the *vita* by Cogitosus does highlight it indirectly. In the preface to his *vita*, Cogitosus openly acknowledges that he has been compelled by his brethren to record the miracles of Brigit. When this admission is paired with the knowledge that Cogitosus is a monk at the abbey of Kildare, an assumption can be made that Cogitosus was working in the scriptorium at the Kildare abbey. Thus, this highlights how Brigit's legacy helped to foster the love of learning in Kildare's scriptorium, and as such showcases the Irish love of learning. This characteristic, just like the first characteristic can also be connected with the second paradox since the other part of the paradox was the love of art and scholasticism in an ascetic life.

---

[100] Edward C. Sellner. *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1993), 21.
[101] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints.* 22.
[102] Sellner. *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints, 22.*

The third characteristic of Celtic Christianity according to Sellner is the innate yearning to explore the unknown. The idea of traveling either in pilgrimage or "white martyrdom", was important to the Celts. White martyrdom, the leaving of one's home for years for the sake of the gospels,[103] was the most ascetic form of the yearning to explore. The pilgrimage, a short or long journey away from home, usually to destinations with sacred significance, was the other most common form of exploring the unknown and was done so in order to increase a person's intimacy with God and heal the body and soul.[104] The idea of travel to the unknown is present in Brigit's *vitae*, mainly the *Vita Prima* and the *Bethu Brigte* as Brigit travels around Ireland. The third paradox – the insular culture impacting and being impacted by, the outside world – is connected to this characteristic since travel, of both the Irish monks and those coming to Ireland impacted the not so insular culture of the island.

Fourth on Sellner's list of Celtic spiritual characteristics is the love of silence and solitude. This characteristic was encouraged in the monasteries[105] though it is not really stressed in Brigit's *vitae*.

The fifth characteristic on Sellner's list, the special understanding and appreciation of time, is present in Brigit's hagiographic tradition. For Celtic Christians, time was a blessed sacred reality where in the present the past lives on and the future is waiting to be born.[106] This fluid sense of time meant that there was a different approach to history as well. In order to explain this point, Sellner takes the example of Patrick and Brigit knowing each other, highlighted by the appearances Patrick makes in Brigit's *vitae*, even though Patrick would have

[103] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints,* 23.
[104] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints,,*23.
[105] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints,* 24.
[106] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints,* 24.

died when Brigit was a young girl.[107] This fluid understanding of time was often employed by the Celtic hagiographers since guest appearances by other saints in hagiography was a common hagiographic element at the time.

The sixth characteristic of Celtic spirituality according to Sellner is an appreciation of ordinary life. Sellner argues that the Celtic Christians valued the day to day routine and the ordinary life.[108] This appreciation for ordinary life is reflected in Brigit's *vitae* through the many miracles that involve everyday household chores such as milking the cows, churning butter and taking care of the flock.

The seventh and final characteristic on the Sellner list is the great value that the Celtic Christians put on kinship connections and ties. These connections were commonly showcased in hagiography through the use of soul friends, stories of fosterage and examples of spiritual mentoring and guidance.[109] A soul friend, or an *anmchara*, is a person who acts as a teacher, mentor, confidant, confessor and spiritual guide.[110] The *anmchara* was an ideal that was important to the Celtic Christians. It is also an ideal that is often associated with Brigit and is found in her *vitae*. In particular it is found in the *Vita Prima*. In the closing chapters of the *Vita Prima*, it says: "Now when Brigit's departure from this world drew near, her protégée, Darlugdach, wanted to leave this life with her. Brigit answered her; 'You will survive me by one year and on the day of my death you will die that we may have that one feastday.' And so it happened."[111]

Along with the above listed characteristics of Celtic spirituality, another trait of Irish hagiography is the use of specific symbols, in particular animals. These symbols were used to

---

[107] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints,* 24-25.
[108] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints,* 25.
[109] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints.* 26-27.
[110] Sellner. *Stories of the Celtic Soul Friends,* 6.
[111] *VP*, 129.

enhance the saint's heroic reputation.[112] These animals, identifiable by specific qualities, were often called the 'tutors of humanity' and symbolized the intuitive powers and helping instincts of humans.[113] Though the list of symbolic animals is long, there are only a few that are present in Brigit's *vitae*.

One such animal is the cow. For the Celts, the cow has quasi-mystical powers because they bear milk, a much needed form of sustenance. Due to this, cows have a great social value placed upon them.[114] There are many stories that involve either cows, calves, milk or a by-product of milk – such as butter – in Brigit's hagiographic tradition. One of the most well known stories about Brigit involving a cow is her birth narrative from the *VP* that describes how Brigit is born after her mother has just milked a cow and then washes newborn Brigit in fresh milk. In most of the other episodes involving cows in Brigit's *vitae,* they are being given as a gift, or have been stolen and restored to their owner, thus highlighting the great social value that was placed on cows.

Another animal that is often associated with Brigit is the fox. The fox symbolizes cleverness and ingenuity, and as such frequents both hagiographies and folklore.[115] The fox is found in one of the most famous stories about Brigit which showcases many hagiographic themes. The episode in question involves a man killing the King's pet fox by mistake and thus being sentenced to death unless he can produce a fox that is just as well trained as the King's. Brigit is beseeched to help and does so by praying to God, who then presents a clever, well-trained fox for her to give to the King. Once the man is released and safe, the fox that impressed the King disappears, thus leaving the King with nothing. This story is found in both the *VP* and

[112] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints.* 32.
[113] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints.* 32.
[114] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints.* 33.
[115] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints.* 34.

Cogitosus' hagiography respectively.[116] The hagiographical elements that the fox helps to highlight in this story are the power of prayer/ceaseless prayer, Brigit's connection with animals and nature and the punishment of 'evil' people, a common Christian theme.

Animals are not the only symbols used to enhance a saint's heroic reputation in Irish hagiography, other symbols, such as fire, are also used. Fire, which represents the power and presence of God often appears in Brigit's *vitae*.[117] There are stories of fiery columns rising from the place where Brigit's pregnant mother lay, where Brigit slept, of the house burning down around her and not harming Brigit, of fire surrounding her upon her consecration and many other similar examples.[118] These examples can be seen as highlighting God's presence in Brigit's life.

Women in Hagiography

In general, women in hagiographies are an under-represented group. There is information to be gained about women in hagiographies, mainly found in the background information provided about a saint's career and life, but this information is always filtered through a male lens.[119] This gendered outlook saw women as a form of "other", beings that came from the otherworld and as such did not need individualisation in their portrayal in hagiographies.[120] This idea of women coming from somewhere outside the known world made femaleness a liminal quality.[121] In other words, women were something that stood on the threshold between two worlds. Due to its liminal nature, femaleness was an unclear and inconsistent topic for male hagiographers to write about thus resulting in them often times moulding and manipulating the idea of femaleness in their writings.

---

[116] See *VP* 125, Cogitosus 20.
[117] Sellner, *Wisdom of Celtic Saints.* 36.
[118] See *VP* chapter 4, 7, 8, 10, 20 for examples.
[119] Johnston, *Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography*, 198.
[120] Johnston, *Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography*, 209-210.
[121] Johnston, *Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography*, 208.

Male hagiographers needed to manipulate and transform femaleness because of certain views and opinions expressed by Christian authority figures at the time. It was largely believed that the mature female stood as a symbol and was a source of sexual temptation, making her the "enemy" of ascetic male saints, somebody they had to be in battle against.[122] This misogynistic opinion caused a problem for male hagiographers when dealing with female saints. The question that faced these men was: How can one present a female saint as an example of the *imago Christi* when her very gender makes her something to be feared? The hagiographers found their answer in the transformation of gender.

As has been discussed earlier in chapter one, the idea of a woman being able to leave her female gender qualities behind and transform herself – at least spiritually – into a man is found in martyr accounts such as those of Blandina and Perpetua. The transformation of gender is also very present in Brigit's hagiographies, and will be discussed at length in chapter three.

Cult of the Saints and the Cult of the Hero:

The cult of saints, though similar in many ways to the hero cult, is distinct. According to historian Peter Brown, the veneration of saints had many implications in the world of early Christianity.[123] This is because the cult of saints is the joining of Heaven and Earth at the grave of a dead person, and as such connection between the realms of the divine and human broke many barriers.[124] Peter Brown contends that in the world of early Christianity, Heaven and Earth were contrasted and opposed,[125] not brought together. The tombs of saints were, as Brown writes: "privileged places, where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met."[126] This is

---

[122] Johnston, *Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography*, 209.
[123] Peter Brown. "The Holy and the Grave" in *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1-2.
[124] Brown, 1-2.
[125] Brown, 2.
[126] Brown, 3.

because it was believed that the saint, who was in heaven, was also "present" at their tomb on earth.[127] The saints were serving as a bridge for those who were still alive[128], in order to access the divine, or the unknown. Thus the veneration of saints, despite being similar to the worship of a divinized hero, something that the people from early Christian time would have had an affinity towards, spawned a number of issues.

According to Brown, the veneration of saints changed basic perspectives when it came to connections between the living and the dead and between God(s) and humans.[129] Unlike in hero worship, where the hero – who was tainted by death – was kept apart from the immortals, in the cult of saints, the saints enjoyed an intimacy with God.[130] This bond thus challenged earlier worldviews held concerning God(s) and humans when the relationship between the living and the dead was added. This person, once alive and now dead, shared a personal relationship with God, thus they were a "friend of God" and as such were able to intercede for and protect the faithful who were still alive.[131] This ability to intercede – something that wasn't available to the hero – is one of the most important differences between the hero and the saint and will be examined later.

Since the hero was a central figure to most folklore traditions, including Celtic traditions, there is a traditional pattern that was used when writing these tales and this is present in many hero tales in Indo-European cultures.[132] The Heroic Biographical Pattern, as scholar Dorothy Bray describes it, has four stages to it. The four sections and their breakdown is as follows: Conception and Birth (unusual in nature), Upbringing (foreshadows heroic future), Career filled

---

[127] Brown, 3
[128] Brown, 3. It is interesting to note here that what was valued about saints – their liminal ability to bridge the gap between worlds – is the same trait (i.e. liminal nature) that was feared in women.
[129] Brown, 6-7.
[130] Brown, 5-6.
[131] Brown, 6.
[132] Dorothy Ann Bray. "The making of a Hero: The Legend of St. Patrick and the Claims of Armagh," 156.

with marvellous deeds, including a major conflict in which the hero wins, and finally Death (unusual in nature and with miraculous elements).[133] This pattern, which was active in the Irish narratives and was applied often to kings and lawgivers as well[134], has some structural crossover with the breakdown of hagiography.

The Heroic Biographical Pattern – or Universal Pattern – as Bray terms it, has many structural similarities to that of a hagiography. The pattern for the hero (conception/birth, upbringing, career, death) finds an almost mirror image in the breakdown of the pattern found in saints' *vitae.* The pattern is as follows: Conception and Birth (often unusual in nature, accompanied by a heavenly phenomenon); Education and Upbringing in religious life (with sanctity often recognized early); Career as a pastor and miracle worker and finally Death (often with miraculous elements)[135]. Many similarities between the two are significant.

First, the four sections of each pattern are essentially the same: Conception, Upbringing, Career and Death, and the second overt similarity, are the subsections of each section. For example, in the Conception and Birth sections, there are elements that are often unusual in nature also present in the Death sections.

Upon a more in-depth comparison of these two patterns, another similarity emerges. In a hero tale, during the second section – Upbringing – there is often a foreshadowing of the heroic future the hero will live. This is similar to the Upbringing part of the hagiography where it says that the saint's sanctity is often recognized early. This early recognition of the young saint's sanctity can be interpreted as a form of foreshadowing this maturity. In order to accomplish the goals of their career, namely being a pastor and miracle worker, a saint needs to exemplify a certain level of sanctity. Thus in the cases when the sanctity of the saint in question is recognized

[133] Bray, "Introduction", 14.
[134] Bray, "Introduction", 14.
[135] Bray, "Introduction", 14.

at an early stage in their upbringing, it is similar to the foreshadowing of a heroic future that happens during the hero's upbringing.

Christian Typologies: Jesus

Another characteristic of the cult of saints and hagiography is the connection between the saints and Jesus. Saints are considered to be living symbols and images of Christ, the *imago Christi*.[136] Since saints are considered as symbols of Christ, there is some crossover between the *vitae* of the saints and Jesus' life. In particular there is a pattern, consisting of seven stages, which is taken from the life of Jesus and often found in hagiographies. The seven stages, which are advanced by the theologian Edward Sellner in his book *Stories of Celtic Soul Friends: Their Meaning for Today,* are as follows: Stage one – Mention of distinguished ancestry, descriptions of birth with extraordinary events and prophetic dreams before the birth as well as the presence of holy people at the birth or shortly after the birth which confirms the greatness of the newborn.[137] Stage two – Finding of a worthy mentor/mentors, either human or angelic.[138] Stage three is becoming a spiritual leader or mentor after having experienced transformation and growth in spiritual wisdom, while stage four is comprised of miracle stories demonstrating spiritual power and intimacy with God, often miracles that are similar to the miracles Jesus performed in the Gospels.[139] Stage five involves the saint traveling to other parts of the countries and foreign shores, often visiting other monasteries.[140] Stages six and seven involve the death of the saint and posthumous miracles. In stage six the saint foretells his/her own death, as he/she prepares his/her followers for life without him/her, by giving his/her final words of wisdom.[141]

---

[136] Sellner. *Stories of the Celtic Soul Friends: Their Meaning for Today.* 47.
[137] Edward Sellner. *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints. 28.* This seven stages should not be confused with Sellner's seven characteristics of Celtic Christianity which are listed earlier in this thesis, starting on page 27.
[138] Sellner. *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints.* 29.
[139] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints,* 29.
[140] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 30.
[141] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 30.

Stage seven consists of the miracles and marvelous happenings that occur after the saint's death, including cures happening at their tombs.[142] These seven stages reflect the life of Jesus as well as the spiritual kinship that the saints have with Jesus,[143] thus highlighting how the saints are portrayed as *imago Christi* in their hagiographies. It should be noted here, that this pattern is almost always found in the *vitae* of male saints but is often not present in the *vitae* of female saints.[144] A possible explanation for this involves the lack of female examples of sanctity present in the early Church. That being said, there were a few stories of religious women that hagiographers could have used as examples.

Christian Typologies: Mary

One of the few female examples that hagiographers had available to them was the Virgin Mary. In the same way that Christian hagiographers would use typologies of Jesus in their writing, they would also use the Virgin Mary as a typology for female saints. In the early medieval period, the time when Brigit's *vitae* were written, the cult of Mary had become influential in Anglo-Saxon England and the Byzantine east, but not the rest of Europe and not Ireland.[145] This is interesting because Brigit is cast in two of her hagiographies, the *VP* and the *BB*, as 'Mary of the Gael'. An analysis of this typology in Brigit's hagiography will follow in Chapter 4. Before it is possible to look at Brigit as Mary in her *vitae*, the cult of Mary needs to be examined more thoroughly.

The Church Fathers believed that Mary was the "quintessential model of the ideal feminine".[146] Mary was held in direct opposition to Eve because it was through Mary's

---

[142] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 30.
[143] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 31.
[144] Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 31.
[145] Diane Peters Auslander, "Gendering the 'Vita Prima': An Examination of St. Brigid's Role as 'Mary of the Gael'", 187.
[146] Auslander, 189.

obedience and humility that life was brought back to mankind after the fall.[147] This is mainly because as the mother of Christ – humanity's salvation – Mary was a key element in God's plan of salvation for humanity.[148] Mary's role was, in essence, to act as the remedy to the problems Eve caused. The belief was that when Eve ate the fruit in the Garden of Eden, humanity fell from grace and women in particular were impacted. Mary however changed that. As St. Jerome (347 - 420) wrote in Letter 22 *To Eustochium,* a letter where he discusses virginity, "(…) now the chain of the curse is broken. Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women."[149] Using her virginity as key, Mary was able to transcend and transform femaleness by embodying the ideal female.[150] In other words, by maintaining her virginity, she maintained her purity and thus transcended the female norm which was largely considered lowly and associated with the sins of the flesh. By achieving this transcendence Mary became the ideal woman, a model for Christian women to try to emulate.

Mary was also seen as a representation of the triumphant Church. There are many images – both material and literary – of Mary as a victorious queen seated on a throne near God and Christ.[151] Mary was also often invoked as a protector in battle and/or a guarantor of victory.[152] This shows how Mary is able to transcend her gender. As the perfect, chaste, obedient woman, thus transcending the spiritual "weakness" of the female gender, Mary is able to be venerated as a battle comrade, a role distinctly held by men.

---

[147] Auslander, 189.
[148] Auslander, 189.
[149] Jerome, "Letter XXII – To Eustochium" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Series II, Volume 6. Editor Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), Verse 21
[150] Auslander, 190.
[151] Auslander, 192.
[152] Auslander 194.

This crossing between gender lines also helps to illustrate one of the many ways in which Mary is a liminal figure. The real key to her liminal nature lies in the virgin birth. Mary was above all else a human, but she was also the Gate of Heaven because she was the pure portal through which Christ came into the world, bringing with him salvation for mankind.[153] Due to the birth of her child, Mary is the link between God/Christ and the world. As the scholar Diana Peters Auslander describes it, Mary is human but she triumphed over nature through grace and steadfastness.[154] She had to be a human woman to give birth, connecting her to humanity, but it was through the virgin birth that she gave the world the key to their salvation, Christ. This means that Mary can move between the worlds of the divine and human. This is similar to how a saint can move between the two worlds. What is interesting to note however is that it is through giving birth that Mary accomplishes this liminal quality, whereas for the saint it is through their death that they are able to stand at the threshold between the human world and the world of the divine.

[153] Auslander 197.
[154] Auslander, 197-198.

Chapter 3: Gender in Brigit's Hagiographies

Brigit's gender, as it is presented in her hagiographies is of a dynamic nature. It is constantly undergoing transformations and upheavals as she is portrayed as very male, very female or a combination of both throughout her hagiographies. These portrayals are Christian typologies of Jesus and Mary as well as Celtic folkloric typologies of hero, *bean feasa* and Sovereignty Queen. Before an analysis of these typologies can happen, a presentation of Brigit's three main *vitae* – Cogitosus' *Life of St. Brigit,* the *Vita Prima,* and the *Bethu Brigte* – their similarities, connections and differences must be offered.

Brigit's Hagiographies: Cogitosus, *Vita Prima*, *Bethu Brigte*

Of Brigit's many *vitae* that might have been written, there are three that have survived, two in their entirety and one missing but a few sections, that are used by Brigidine scholars. In chronological order, they are: Cogitosus' *Life of St. Brigit,* the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae,* and the *Bethu Brigte*. Cogitosus, who lived in the 7th century, is the only Brigit hagiographer identified by name and the authenticity of his authorship is established by himself in the *vita* where he names himself in verse two of the epilogue writing: "Pray for me, Cogitosus (…)".[155] Cogitosus also provides scholars with the information that he is a monk of Kildare who has been commissioned by his brother monks to record the great deeds of their founding saint, Brigit.[156] It must be noted however, in spite of the fact that Cogitosus never directly names Kildare, given the many references he makes to the great monastery and monastic community at the beginning and the end of the *vita* it can be concluded that it is Kildare that Cogitosus is writing about.[157] What makes Cogitosus' *vita* interesting to scholars – apart from the fact that he identifies himself – is that he gives an eyewitness account of what the monastery of Kildare looked like and how it

[155] Cogitosus, Epilogue:2.
[156] Cogitosus, Preface 1-2.
[157] Kim McCone, "Brigit in the Seventh Century: A Saint with Three Lives?" 108-109.

functioned at the height of its power.[158] Cogitosus also provides his reader, and scholars today, with an eyewitness account of the way the monks functioned according to some sort of rule and an account of the church that was built to honour Brigit.[159] Cogitosus' *vita* is structured in four sections. First the prologue, then the recounting of thirty miracles of Brigit's lifetime, followed by the recounting of four posthumous miracles and finished by the epilogue.[160] Many of the thirty miracles Brigit performed in her lifetime in Cogitosus' *vita* are also found in the *VP* and the *BB*.

The *Vita Prima* and Cogitosus' *Life of St.-Brigit* are connected by more than just common miracles however. For many years, scholars believed that the *Vita Prima* – literally "first life" – was written before Cogitosus' *vita*.[161] Towards the end of the 20th century however, scholars came to the conclusion that Cogitosus' *vita* was is fact written earlier than the *Vita Prima* thus rendering the name *Vita Prima* misleading. However, since it had always been known as such, no name change occurred. The exact composition date for these two hagiographies are not known for certain but the estimate is that Cogitosus wrote sometime around 650-675 C.E. and that the earliest date for the *VP* is the middle of the 8th century.[162] As for dating the *Bethu Brigte*, Irish scholar Donncha O hAodha, whose translation of the *Bethu Brigte* is highly regarded, dates the *BB* to the eighth century because the Irish used in this Irish and Latin text dates to about the early ninth century.[163] Given the relatively close time span in which the *vitae* were composed, it is not surprising that there is content that is common to all three.

---

[158] Sean Connolly and J.M Picard, trans, "Cogitosus' "Life of St-Brigit": Content and Value", 5-6.
[159] Connolly and Picard, 6.
[160] McCone, 109.
[161] Sean Connolly, trans. *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* (Ireland: Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1989). 5.
[162] Connolly, *Vita Prima*, 6-7.
[163] Donncha O hAodha, ed., *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), xix.

The connection between Cogitosus' hagiography and the *VP* is fairly strong. Of the thirty lifetime miracles found in Cogitosus' *vita* twenty-nine of them are also found in the *VP*.[164] The last section of miracles in the *VP*, chapters 96-114 are almost identical to Cogitosus' hagiography.[165] This strong connection is interesting because it illustrates the close relationship between the two texts, leading some to believe that the anonymous author of the VP most likely had access to Cogitosus' life. This close connection between the two *vitae* is also very interesting given the connection the two *vitae* have to the third Brigit hagiography, the *Bethu Brigte.*

In terms of connection between Cogitosus' life and the *BB*, there is very little common ground. Of the miracles Cogitosus relates, a small number appear in the *BB*, consisting mostly of the miracles Brigit performed during her youth.[166] Along with the miracles, another major difference between the two *vitae* is found in the frame work. Both the *BB* and the *VP* are topographically framed, showing Brigit going on many journeys. The *VP* is broken down as follows: chapters 1-15 showcase Brigit's first journey, 16-42 her second journey, 43-65 her third journey, 66-85 her fourth journey, 86-95 her fifth journey, 96-114 no real journeying, mainly staying stationary and performing miracles (this is the section that coincides with Cogitosus' life) and finally from 115-129, her final acts and death.[167] The *BB*'s topographical breakdown starts with her spending time in Connacht and Munster as an infant, then returning to her father's land in Ui Fhailgi for her childhood, then she takes the veil in Mag Tulach and remains for awhile, only to move again through Mide and then Tethbae, then on to Tailtiu in Brega to meet with Patrick and finally back to Leinster in the final parts of the manuscript before it breaks off.[168] All of this travel is contrasted with the almost complete lack of journeying that Brigit does in

[164] McCone, 112.
[165] McCone, 112.
[166] O hAodha, xiii.
[167] McCone 111-112.
[168] O hAodha, xii.

Cogitosus' life. Cogitosus writes of one episode where Brigit travels to the plain of Brega, but apart from that he keeps Brigit in her home province of Leinster.[169] These comparisons and contrasts between the three *vitae* are significant because as has been mentioned, Cogitosus' *vita* is closely connected with the *VP* but does not have a strong relationship with the *BB.* That being said the relationship and connections between the *VP* and the *BB* are strong.

As has been noted, both the *VP* and the *BB* have frameworks that revolve around Brigit's travels, which is the first of the similarities between the two. The fact that they both have geographical frameworks is of no surprise since the content of the *BB* finds its shadow image in the content found in the *VP*, sections 5-42.[170] That being said, there is no birth or death scene in the *BB* because the leaflet with these scenes has been lost, thus making the *BB* an incomplete *vita*.[171] Scholars strongly believe that there was a common source from which both the *VP* and the *BB* drew. O hAodha states that the *BB* is the life which is more faithful to the original source given the precision in the topography and nomenclature of the *BB* as opposed to the vagueness of the *VP*.[172] McCone approaches the idea of a common source in a different way by addressing the number of miracles that are common and different in each *vita.* McCone states that there are six miracles found in the *BB* that are not in the *VP*, two found in the *VP* that are not in the *BB* and that there are two episodes – *BB* 21-29 and *VP* 18-25 – that appear in different places in their respective narratives which is compared to all the other episodes that fall in the same order in both narratives.[173] The conclusion which McCone draws from this comparison is that the common source no longer exists and that it would most likely have been the same length as the *BB*, corresponding to *VP* 1-41, after which the *VP* draws from several different sources, all of

[169] O hAodha, xii.
[170] McCone, 112.
[171] McCone, 112.
[172] O hAodha, xix.
[173] McCone 119.

which are lost.[174] One last note that should be made about the *vitae*, is that Cogitosus has a Kildare bias – since he was a monk at Kildare, it was his job to promote the monastic center as much as the saint – this bias being a possible reason for why he kept Brigit in and around her home.[175] The other two *vitae* have no real interest in Kildare, stressing much more Brigit's connection and interaction with Patrick and Armagh. For Cogitosus, the treatement was different, as Kim McCone writes: "Cogitosus shows not the slightest interest in Armagh or the Patrick legend throughout his work."[176] As can be seen from all of the similarities and differences highlighted above, the three *vitae* are linked and share some common material but they each have their own distinct character. This distinct character is apparent in the way each *vita* approaches the presentation of Brigit's gender, whether it be using more male typologies, Brigit as Jesus and Brigit as hero, or more female typologies, Brigit as Mary and Brigit as *Bean Feasa.*

Brigit as Jesus:

Chapter Two highlighted how saints were considered the *imago Christi* and thus their hagiographies often followed a similar pattern to the life of Jesus. As was mentioned, that pattern, made up of seven stages, was usually not present in the *vitae* of female saints. This section will examine the ways that Brigit's *vitae* do and do not fit into the same pattern.

Of the seven stages mentioned in chapter two, six are present in at least one of Brigit's *vitae.* The first stage – mention of ancestry/description of birth after extraordinary events and prophetic dreams – is present in the *Vita Prima*. The *VP* goes into great detail about Brigit's parents before her birth. It is also the only one of her three main hagiographies (Cogitosus' *vita*, *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigte*) to provide information about Brigit's birth.

[174] McCone 124.
[175] McCone 108.
[176] McCone 113.

There are actually two prophecies about Brigit's birth in the *VP*. The first one is found in Chapter 2 where a druid meets a pregnant Broicsech (Brigit's mother) riding in a chariot with her master and lover, Dubthach (Brigit's father). The druid tells Dubthach: "Take good care of this woman, for the child she has conceived will be extraordinary."[177] The druid also delivers a part of the prophecy to Broicsech when he tells her: "Keep your spirits up; no one can harm you; the grace of your little infant will set you free. You will give birth to an illustrious daughter who will shine in the world like the sun in the vault of heaven."[178] This prophecy is not the only one delivered in the *VP* however. There is another prophecy delivered to Dubthach's wife by the bishops Mel and Melchu. They tell the wife that: "The offspring of your bondmaid will excel you and your progeny. Nevertheless love the bondmaid as you do your sons because her offspring will greatly benefit your children".[179] Both of these prophecies highlight how extraordinary Brigit will be and thus fulfill part of the first stage.

The *VP* also has a description of Brigit's birth which provides the other part of the first stage. The description of Brigit's birth, found in Chapter 6, verses 3-4, is in and of itself a different type of birth narrative and illustrates how Brigit's birth is fulfilling yet another prophecy about her.

> When morning came and the sun had risen, the druid's bondmaid came to the house carrying a vessel full of milk which had just been milked, and when she had put one foot across the threshold of the house and the other foot outside, she fell astride the threshold and gave birth to a daughter. This is how the prophet said this bondmaid would give birth, neither in the house nor outside the house, and the infant's body was washed with the warm milk which she was carrying.[180]

This description of Brigit's birth is important because it is present after prophecies about Brigit have been made, thus it is keeping true with all of the sections of the first stage of Jesus'/a

[177] *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae* , 2:3.
[178] *VP* 2:4.
[179] *VP* 3.
[180] *VP* 6:3-4.

saint's life. It also highlights that there was even a prophecy about how Brigit would be born, and that her birth proved true to the prophecy. By containing both prophetic statements about Brigit and a description of her birth, the *VP* is presenting Brigit as an *imago Christi* by connecting the development of her life with the life of Jesus.

The second stage of the Jesus life pattern – finding a worthy mentor, either human or angelic – is not found in any of Brigit's *vitae*. This is the only stage of the seven stages that Brigit does not fulfill in any way, in any of her hagiographies, thus making her Christ-like portrayal inconsistent. That being said however, the argument that Brigit is connected to Jesus through similar stages in her *vitae*, is still a valid one. This is because, as has been mentioned, these seven stages were not for the most part incorporated into the *vitae* of female saints, and thus the fact that the six other stages are highlighted in at least one of Brigit's *vitae,* show her hagiographers' intention of casting Brigit as an *imago Christi*, even if that image is at times inconsistent. As is the case with many aspects of Brigit's hagiographical tradition, there are often more inconsistencies then consistencies, especially when it comes to the roles Brigit is cast in by her hagiographers. One possible explanation for this is the nature of the gender transformations Brigit experiences, something that will be examined at the end of this chapter.

To continue with the analysis of how Brigit's life mirrors that of Jesus' through the use of the above mentioned seven stages, stage three – becoming a spiritual leader after a transformation – is found in some form in all three of her *vitae*. In Cogitosus' *vita* this transformation is explained briefly as Brigit deciding to take the veil, and ultimately beginning her life as a spiritual leader, after having been "inspired from above."[181] This transformation is presented as minor and is almost elided by Cogitosus. It is nonetheless important because right after having taken the veil, Brigit performs her first miracle solo (without overtly praying to God

[181] Cogitosus, 14.

before hand) thus showcasing how, after having received divine inspiration and taking the veil, Brigit starts her life as a holy leader performing miracles.

The transformations in *VP* and the *BB* –which are very similar – involve both a physical and a spiritual change. In these scenes, Brigit disfigures herself, "Thereupon she immediately thrusts her finger into her eye"[182] in order to avoid marriage and be allowed to take the veil. As in Cogitosus' version of the veiling scene, right after having been consecrated as a nun, Brigit performs miracles thus starting her career as a spiritual leader. In the *VP*, her first miracle is the same as in Cogitosus – blessing the wood of the altar to restore it to its living beauty and giving it healing powers.[183] In the *BB* however, Brigit does not perform only one miracle but three miracles right after having received her veil, all of them reminiscent of miracles Jesus performed or miracles performed by other biblical patriarchs. Specifically as a result of Brigit's miracle, a "spring flowed in dry land, the meat turned into bread, the hand of one of the three men was cured."[184] By having Brigit perform miracles that are obviously part of a biblical and specifically Jesus typology, her hagiographer is highlighting how she is an *imago Christi* and living a life similar to Jesus'.

The fourth stage of Jesus' life pattern often found in saints' *vitae* is the presence of miracle stories. These miracles often resemble the miracles Jesus performed in the Gospels and are present in all three of Brigit's *vitae*. Throughout her hagiographies, Brigit is often seen performing such miracles as turning water into ale, curing lepers, multiplying food and drink and curing blind, deaf and dumb people. For example in Cogitosus' life, Brigit turns water into ale early in her *vita* when "seeing some water prepared for the baths and blessing it with the power

[182] *BB*, 23.
[183] *VP*, 18, Cogitosus, 14.
[184] *BB*, 24.

of faith, she changed it into excellent ale and drew it in abundance for the thirsty men."[185] The connection between this miracle and the miracles in the gospels is further heightened when Cogitosus writes: "For He who changed the water into wine at Cana in Galilee also changed water into ale through the faith of this most blessed woman."[186] Here Cogitosus does not just rely on his reader's knowledge of biblical stories to make the connection between Brigit and Jesus by themselves, he explicitly states that it is through Jesus and faith in Jesus that Brigit performed this miracle, thus strengthening the link.

The fifth stage of the Jesus/saint life pattern is travel to other parts of the country, other monasteries and often to see other religious leaders. Though she does travel to a certain extent in Cogitosus' life, it is in the *VP* and *BB* that Brigit travels the most. In the *VP*, Brigit starts traveling around Ireland, from a young age, to such places as Connachta and Muma.[187] Most of her adult life, as it is presented in the *VP* and the *BB*, is spent travelling around the country to other churches and or to see other religious figures: "At this time saint Brigit was a guest at the monastery of St.Laisre."[188] In the *VP* Brigit also makes a trip to see Patrick at Mag Breg.[189] These are just a few of the many examples of Brigit traveling in her hagiographies.

The sixth stage of the life pattern – knowing death is coming – is only really present in the *VP*. There is no real mention of her death in either Cogitosus' life or the *BB*. In the *VP* however, Brigit tells one of her followers, much like Jesus did with his, about life after her death. In particular Brigit told her protégée Darlugdach that "You will survive me by one year and on

[185] Cogitosus, 15.
[186] Cogitosus, 15-16.
[187] *VP* 15-16.
[188] *VP*, 24.
[189] *VP*, 22. It should be noted that this visit to see Patrick is characteristic of the emphasis placed on the dominance of Patrick and Armagh over Brigit and Kildare in later traditions.

the day of my death you will die that we may have the one feast day."[190] This prophecy, which according to the *VP* came true, is how Brigit knew her death was coming.

The seventh and final stage, miracles after death, is also only found in one of Brigit's three *vitae*. In the *VP*, her death is what ends the *vita* whereas in the case of the *BB*, the only surviving codex of this *vita* is incomplete so the *BB* ends in the middle of recounting Brigit's many miracles. In Cogitosus' *vita* however, where Brigit's death is barely mentioned, there are two long chapters that go in-depth in describing two particular posthumous miracles performed by Brigit. The first one, found in Chapter 31, outlines how "the bounty of divine generosity still continues to work other miracles in her monastery where her venerable body rests" helps to move a millstone down a mountain and into the monastery. [191] This chapter, which has twelve verses, describes in detail how it is thanks to their faith in Brigit's advocacy and their calling on her for help that the villagers are able to move the millstone. This miracle story, when paired with the second posthumous miracle story about the new church door Brigit caused to fit into the earlier architecture both highlight how Brigit performed miracles for those who believed and had faith in her, very much in keeping with Jesus' posthumous miracles.[192] This completes the analysis of Brigit being cast as the Christian typology of Jesus, one of the two Christian typologies found in Brigit's *vitae*. Of her three hagiographies, it is the *VP* that uses this typology the most evidently and follows the pattern the best. The second typology used in Brigit's *vitae* is that of Mary.

[190] *VP*, 48.
[191] Cogitosus, 31:1.
[192] Cogitosus, 31-32.

Brigit as Mary of the Gael:

In terms of the Christian typology of Mary, the strongest representation in Brigit's hagiographies is found in the *Vita Prima*. In the *VP*, Brigit is shown to be a type of Mary, in particular as a victorious queen and as a liminal figure.

As was mentioned in chapter two, the Marian typology of ideal womanhood depicted in the Middle Ages is reflected in the traditions of Brigit's exercise of the virtues of the Christian life and the good woman. The episode where this typology is the most heavily showcased is in the chapter of the *VP* where Brigit gets her famous title of "Mary of the Gael". In this scene, a holy man at a synod proclaims to the crowd "I have seen Mary and a certain man standing beside her who said to me, "This is holy Mary who has been dwelling among you."'[193] At this point, Brigit walks into the synod and the holy man pronounces her to be the Mary he had seen: "This is Mary whom I saw, for I clearly recognize her features."[194] It is after this that the crowd goes on to "glorify her as a type of Mary."[195] What this passage illustrates, especially the last part, is that the hagiographer who wrote the *VP* wanted to code Brigit as a type of Mary, and thus ultimately as an example of a virtuous "good" woman. What is interesting is the possible twofold purpose behind this typology. First, the hagiographer related Brigit to the strongest female role of the new religion, Mary, the mother of Christ, thus keeping with the traditions of hagiography and using a Christian typology. Second, he provided Irish women with an example to live up to. Diane Peters Auslander writes of the connection between Mary and Brigit: "(…) it does imply that women have the choice to perfect, or even redeem, themselves through Brigid's example, thus making Brigid, like Mary, a model of the ideal feminine and a living beacon illuminating

[193] *VP,* 15:2.
[194] *VP*, 15:3.
[195] *VP*, 15.3.

the path to salvation."[196] In casting Brigit as a type of Mary, her hagiographer is providing the women in the budding Christian community with an example that they can relate to; an Irish born and bred Christian convert, who through maintaining her virginity was able to achieve prominence in both the secular and divine realms. By embodying the ideal female, Brigit is able to transcend her gender, much like Mary did, ultimately opening up the possibilities of being cast in male gender roles such as the hero.

The second way in which Brigit is cast as a type of Mary is through the imagery of Brigit as a triumphant queen. As was mentioned before, the image of Mary as a victorious queen represented the triumphant Church. Diane Auslander states that similarly, Brigit could be seen as representing the success of the Church in Ireland when she writes in her article "Gendering the Vita Prima: An Examination of St. Brigid's Role as "Mary of the Gael"": "… her triumph was symbolic not only of the possibility of living a saintly life on earth but also of the success of the church in Ireland just as Mary is symbolic of the success of the universal Church."[197] The scene where this image is the most evident is her death scene in the *VP*. This scene opens with the sentence "After her victory saint Brigit departed this life (…)"[198] thus creating the image that Brigit was triumphant in this life, the life where she remained obedient to God and was concerned with heavenly matters instead of worldly matters.[199] It was not only life however that Brigit triumphed over. She also Christianized aspects of Ireland's queenly figures of the pre-Christian era.

The role she played in establishing Christianity in Ireland is another way that she is viewed as a victorious queen. Just as Mary is the Mother of the Church, Brigit can be considered

---

[196] Auslander, 190.
[197] Auslander, 193.
[198] *VP*, 129.2.
[199] Auslander, 193.

the Mother of the Irish Church. This is because it is in her *vitae* that the earliest references to monastic foundations in Ireland can be found.[200] There are even some scholars who suggest that Kildare might have been the first monastery in Ireland. This then would make Brigit – as the founder of the Kildare monastery – the mother of the ecclesiastical institution that is the most characteristically Irish.[201] By showcasing Brigit as a victorious queen, her hagiographer strengthens the Mary typology found in the *VP*.

The third way that Brigit is cast in a Mary typology is her liminal nature. As was mentioned earlier, Mary has a liminal nature because though she is human, she is the gateway through which Jesus, the salvation of humanity, passed. Her virgin birth connects her to both humanity and the divine. Brigit, of course does not have a virgin birth as the source of her liminal nature, because according to Christian tradition there is only one virgin birth, that of Christ. Instead, it is Brigit's own birth, as shown in the *VP* that provides the foundation for her liminal nature. In the lengthy birth narrative in the *VP* there are two verses dedicated to Brigit's unusual birth. What is different about Brigit's birth is that she was born on a threshold as described in the quote below.

> When morning came and the sun had risen, the druid's bondmaid came to the house carrying a vessel full of milk which had just been milked, and when she had put one foot across the threshold of the house and the other foot outside, she fell astride the threshold and gave birth to a daughter. That is how the prophet said this bondmaid would give birth, neither in the house nor outside the house, (…)[202]

As this section makes sure to underline, Brigit was born between worlds. She was not fully in the house nor was she fully outside of it. Instead, she was born on the threshold, a liminal place. Just as Mary's experience of the virgin birth placed her on the threshold between the human world and the divine world, Brigit's birth on the threshold of a house placed her between the traditional

[200] Auslander, 193.
[201] Auslander, 194.
[202] *VP,* 6.3-4.

gender worlds; inside the house where the female resides and outside the house where the man traditionally resides. Thus, Brigit bridges the gap between genders, being cast as neither fully female nor fully male. Brigit's liminal qualities are further strengthened upon her death, when as a saint, she is now able to move between the world of humans and that of the divine. So both the beginning and end of Brigit's life reinforce her liminal qualities.

Brigit's liminal nature is also highlighted in the way that she bridged the gap between the high and low class of Irish society and the gap between pre-Christian Ireland and Christian Ireland. Brigit stands on the threshold between the high and low classes of Irish society because she is liminal in her parentage. Her father is "(…) a nobleman of Leinster stock named Dubthach (…)" and her mother is "(…) a bondmaid named Broicsech (…)".[203] Since her father is of noble descent and her mother is a slave, Brigit, through her very conception, forms a tie between the two worlds, the upper and lower echelons of Irish society.

Brigit also connects the Ireland of pre-Christian times with the newly Christianized Ireland. Throughout her *vitae* Brigit is seen interacting, on many different occasions, with druids. In pre-Christian times, the druids were the professional class of priests, jurists, doctors and bards who were the preservers of group memory and culture.[204] Thus, the druids could be seen as the class that the priests, abbots and monks replaced with the coming of Christianity. What is interesting about Brigit's dealings with the druids is that, unlike the dealings Patrick had with them, Brigit does not try to annihilate and demean the druids. All of her interactions with the druids are peaceful, thus showing how Brigit stood on the limits of the two worlds and tried to bring them together.

---

[203] *VP,*1.1.
[204] Michelle P. Brown. *How Christianity Came to Britain and Ireland.* 18.

It could even be argued that her name and its origins are another example of Brigit bridging the gap between the pre-Christian and Christian worlds. She was presumably named after the pre-Christian goddess Brigit, thus providing a connection to the past. She then goes on to carve out a place for herself as a noted Christian leader, sharing the same name and many of the same rituals associated with Brigit the goddess. It should be noted however that the rituals which the two Brigit's are said to share create a point of tension. Nowhere in Brigit's surviving *vitae* is there any mention of liturgical rituals performed at Kildare. The main ritual that the goddess and the saint are said to have in common is a fire burning in their honour tended to by their female followers. The first reference to Brigit's perpetual flame is found in the work of Giraldus Cambrensis, the twelfth century Welsh cleric, also known as Gerald of Wales. He writes of Kildare in his survey of Ireland, the *Topographia Hibernica,* and includes a description of the fire. He writes:

> "Among these, the first that occurs is the fire of St. Brigit, which is reported never to go out. (…) As in the time of St. Brigit twenty nuns were here engaged in the Lord's warfare, she herself being the twentieth, after her glorious departure, nineteen have always formed the society, the number having never been increased. Each of them has the care of the fire for a single night in turn, and, on the evening before the twentieth night, the last nun, having heaped wood upon the fire, says, "Brigit, take charge of your own fire; for this night belongs to you." She then leaves the fire, and in the morning it is found that the fire has not gone out, and that the usual quantity of fuel has been used."[205]

This description of the ritual surrounding the fire at Kildare is the first and only known descriptions of the fire.

This connection between the goddess' fire and the saint's fire could merely be seen as a form of Christian appropriation, but as has been mentioned before, this would deny the existence of a Christian Irish woman named Brigit, a view that is not held by this author. Regardless of

[205] Giraldus Cambrensis, Chapter XXXIV: "Of various miracles in Kildare; and first, of the fire which never goes out, and the ashes which never increase", and Chapter XXXV: "How the fire is kept alive by St. Brigit on her night" in *The Topography of Ireland* trans. Thomas Forester, (Cambridge, ON: 2000) 53-54.

how it might be viewed, her name and the connection it allots her to the past does provide another example of how Brigit is a liminal character who bridges the gap between the pre-Christian past and her Christian present. It is not only as a liminal Mary figure however that Brigit bridges that gap, it is also in her being cast as a Celtic folkloric hero.

Brigit as Hero/Saint:

As the examination of both the hero tale and the saint's life has shown in Chapter Two, the saint in a way became the 'hero' of Christian lore. St. Brigit and her hagiographies are an example of how the two melded together, as folklore and hagiography melded together. That being said, there are times when Brigit is more hero than saint. The following passages, upon examination, will highlight how Brigit's hagiographers made her a perfect blend of hero/saint while at times stressing one side more than the other.

In Cogitosus' *Life of St. Brigit*, Brigit is often cast as a saintly heroic figure. At the beginning of the hagiography, Cogitosus complies with the first section of the pattern: Conception and Birth. However, he deals with both the conception and the birth briefly: "Now, saint Brigit, whom God foreknew and predestined according to his own image, was born in Ireland of Christian and noble parents belonging to the good and most wise sept of Echtech."[206] This passage shows how Cogitosus did indicate conception and birth by tying them in together when he writes: "born in Ireland of Christian and noble parents". Despite the brevity with which this section was handled, Cogitosus made Brigit more saint than hero because he assigns a heavenly phenomenon to her birth. Cogitosus writes that Brigit was both foreknown by God and had been "predestined according to his own image" thus making her very birth the heavenly phenomenon. One could argue that all humans are made in God's image as Genesis indicates, and there is nothing special about Brigit being made in God's image, thus making her just one of

[206] Cogitosus, 1:1.

many. While this is true, and Genesis does state that human kind was made in God's image, Genesis does not state however that all humans were known by God before. According to the Christian tradition, one other was known by God and this man stood as the exemplar of Christianity and Christian living. It is stated at the beginning of the Gospel of John, in particular 1:1 – 1:2, that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." This passage, of course, refers to Jesus, the son of God, the son of man, the example of perfect Christian living and as some would venture to say, the hero of Christianity.

What is interesting about this allusion to Christ in Cogitosus' version of Brigit's conception and birth is that by aligning her with Christ, Cogitosus is illustrating one of the conventions of writing hagiography; the use of Scripture and Christian lore. Dorothy Ann Bray comments about the use of Scripture and Christian lore in her article "A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints" and says the following: "The Scriptures were used primarily as a means of placing the native Irish saints in the same tradition as the saints of the Roman Church and in the ecclesiastical history of the western world."[207] The allusion would cause the reader to think of Christ and in so doing, creates a link between Brigit and the mother Church, which is something else that Irish hagiography strove to achieve.[208] Another important convention of hagiography and saints in general that Cogitosus illustrates is the fact that according to Bray, saints were chosen for their role before birth.[209] Thus, stating that Brigit was known by God before her birth, Cogitosus not only creates a link between Brigit and Christ, but he also ascribes to her a connection with the divinity and as such casts Brigit as a saintly hero, rather than a hero saint.

---

[207] Bray, "Introduction", 20.
[208] Bray, "Introduction", 20.
[209] Bray, "Introduction", 10-11.

The tendency to cast Brigit more as a saintly hero continues in Cogitosus' hagiography. Right after the opening, where both Brigit's conception and birth are barely discussed, Cogitosus provides the reader with an anecdote about her upbringing. In this long passage, stretching from chapter 1, verse 3 till verse 7, he describes Brigit's early life doing such tasks as churning butter. The story relates that while churning butter for the household Brigit "preferring to obey God rather then men, distributed the milk and butter liberally to the poor and the guests."[210] Brigit's charity – the greatest of the three Christian theological virtues, faith, hope and charity – proves to be an issue because when it is her time to show the yield of her work for the day, she had nothing to show. So in fear of her mother, Brigit "inflamed with an ardour of faith so intense and unquenchable, she turned to the Lord and prayed. Without delay the Lord heard the maiden's voice and prayers. And, being a helper in the hour of need, he came to her assistance with the generous bestowal of divine gift and lavishly restored the butter for the maiden who had confidence in him."[211] The scene from which this passage is taken shows Brigit's sanctity in a number of ways.

Firstly, Brigit is shown displaying the virtue of charity thus illustrating her virtuous character. Being invested with the Christian virtues – such as charity – is one of the defining features of a saint.[212] The second sign of sanctity that is illustrated in this scene is when Brigit prays. In Christian tradition concerning prayer, there is a saying, taken from scripture, which says 'ask and you shall receive'. It is first found in the Gospel of Luke, specifically Luke 11:9-10 when Jesus says "So I say to you, Ask and it shall be given to you, search and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened for you." To summarize, if a person is faithful and asks something of God, they will receive it. Brigit had faith, asked for help from God and received

[210] Cogitosus, 13.
[211] Cogitosus., 14.
[212] Bray, "Introduction", 10.

what she needed. This is extremely important to showcasing Brigit's sanctity because saints were to be examples of perfect Christians and serve as guides in how to live the perfect Christian life. Brigit's asking and receiving does exactly that. Saints were characterized by having a close personal relationship with God. Brigit's constant praying for, and receiving, what she needs from God highlights this relationship.

The third point of importance regarding Brigit's sanctity at a young age is that after she demonstrated charity and was granted what she prayed for, she was recognized by the community for her sanctity. The end of the story, found in chapter 1, verse 8 says that: "And when the miracle of this great gift was fully discovered and came to the public notice, everyone praised God who had brought it and they marvelled that there was such power of faith in a maiden's heart."[213] By having Brigit's sanctity recognized during her years as a girl, Cogitosus portrayed Brigit as more of a saint than a hero.

While Cogitosus' *vita* of Brigit emphasizes Brigit in the realm of Christian sainthood rather than being a hero, one of her other *vitae*, the *VP*, underlines the heroic aspects of her life. The *VP* starts the story of Brigit's life with a detailed description of both her conception and birth. The story of Brigit's parents is what opens the *vita* and is followed right away by her conception: "Her master Dubthach desired her and slept with her and she became pregnant by him."[214] This passage clearly focused on the circumstances of Brigit's conception and does so in a much more concrete way then Cogitosus. Even though there is nothing unusual about Brigit's conception – one of the markers for the conception/birth of both hero and saint – her birth, in the *VP* has an unusual aspect to it.

---

[213] Cogitosus, 1:8.
[214] *VP,* 1:2.

The retelling of the day Brigit was born starts off simply enough with her mother – Brioicsech – going about her daily chores of milking.[215] As she goes to enter the house, "… when she had one foot across the threshold of the house and the other foot outside, she fell astride the threshold and gave birth to a daughter."[216] What is unusual about this birth tale is that by giving birth to Brigit over the threshold, Brioicsech was fulfilling a prophecy that had been made about Brigit's birth. The prophecy, which is detailed in the next verse said that: "… this bondmaid would give birth, neither in the house nor outside the house,(…)"[217] It is important that there was a prophecy about how Brigit would be born, and that the nature of the prophecy in and of itself is unusual. Even though the conception and birth scenes do not cast Brigit as more of a hero, since an unusual birth and a prophecy could easily be applied to either hero or saint, it is what follows that illustrates how the *VP* cast Brigit as a hero.

The sections of the *VP* that deal with Brigit's education and upbringing, cast Brigit as both hero and saint, similar to the way her conception and birth did. During the parts that deal with her career, she performs many holy miracles, often similar to those of Jesus and the apostles, which is another trait of hagiographies.[218] However, not all of her miracles are purely saintly. Closer to the end of the *vita*, while Brigit is performing a miracle of charity and saving a man from death, she is forced to bargain with the King for his loyalty to her father and to release a servant from their bonds.[219] In order to secure this man's freedom, the King asks Brigit to grant him two favours, which she grants him: first that he will live a long life and second that he will

[215] *VP*, 6:3.
[216] *VP*, 6:3
[217] *VP*, 6:4.
[218] Bray, "Introduction", 11.
[219] *VP*, 88:2-3.

have victory in every battle.[220] The next verse illustrates how Brigit fulfilled one of these favours, and it is here that she is shown to be more of a hero.

At the beginning of a battle, the King, Mag Breg, sees that the enemy outnumber his men so he says: "Call on Brigit for help that the saint might fulfill her promises."[221] In response to this cry for help, "(…) the king immediately saw saint Brigit going before him into battle with her staff in her right hand and a column of fire was blazing skywards from her head. Then the enemy were routed (…)"[222] This passage illustrates Brigit going into battle very much like a hero would have done, and coming out victorious, a trait of being a good hero. A note should be made about this particular example however. Though Brigit entered into battle and emerged victorious, she is doing so on somebody else's behalf. Brigit is interceding. As was mentioned in Chapter Three, the ability to intercede is something that is related to saints, not heroes. So although the hagiographer of the *VP* is coding Brigit as a hero, he is also highlighting Brigit's sainthood. It should be noted however that Brigit's birth narrative in the *VP* can be, and was, used earlier in this chapter, to illustrate how Brigit was cast in a Jesus typology and a Mary typology. Brigit's birth narrative is one of the many scenes in the *VP* that provide a multilayered image of gender coding. The layered coding in Brigit's hagiographies will be explained later in this chapter.

The recounting of Brigit's death in the *VP* is another example of Brigit being portrayed as a victorious hero. Brigit's death is described as such:

> After her victory saint Brigit departed from this life amid choirs of patriarchs and prophets and apostles and martyrs and all the holy men and virgins and amid the ranks of angels and archangels to the eternal diadems of the heavenly kingdom, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the kingdom without end where everlasting rewards are bestowed through Our Lord Jesus Christ together with the Father and Holy Spirit through endless ages.[223]

---

[220] *VP*, 88:4.
[221] *VP*, 88:5.
[222] *VP*, 88:6.
[223] *VP*, 129:2.

This passage starts with claiming that Brigit won a victory, which as mentioned above is the sign of a good hero, like the Irish hero Cu Chulainn. Her death is also miraculous in nature. True, there are overtly Christian aspects, namely the large heavenly choir announcing her arrival to heaven, but since she is cited as having won the victory first, this passage, along with the other examples provided from the *VP*, make Brigit a hero saint. What is interesting about this passage is that it can also be interpreted to be showing Brigit as a victorious queen, part of the Mary typology, as was shown in the analysis of the Mary typology earlier in this chapter. Thus, once again, there is a duality to Brigit's gender coding. This passage shows her to be both a hero and a type of Mary. As such it illustrates the constant gender transcendence Brigit underwent in her *vitae.*

Brigit as *Bean Feasa* and Sovereignty Queen

The hero is not the only folkloric character to find its way into Brigit's hagiographies. Brigit is also often cast as a wise woman. The *Bean Feasa* – wise woman – and their legends, of which there were many, were part of the Irish lore repertoire.[224] The character of the *bean feasa* was a central figure in the Irish oral tradition and their legends were seen as an expression of popular religious tradition, similar to tales of Christian piety.[225] The wise woman was addressed in her legends either by a title or her first name in which case the title was implied. [226] There were many titles and they all meant something similar. For example there is *bean feasa* ("woman of knowledge"), *bean leighis* ("woman of healing"), *bean siubhail* ("travelling woman"), *seanbhean* ("old woman"), *cailleach* ("old woman, hag"), *bean chumhachtach* ("powerful woman, woman of supernatural power"), *bean chrosach* ("fortune-telling woman") or one of the

[224] Gearoid O Crualaoich. "Reading the *Bean Feasa*", *Folklore* 116 (2005), 37.
[225] O Crualaoich., 38.
[226] O Crualaoich, 40.

English terms – *a strange woman* and *an old woman*.[227] Many of these titles could be used to describe Brigit as she was a knowledgeable, powerful woman who travelled and could heal many. This will be examined in more depth in a later section of this chapter.

In the Irish tradition, there were two main types of encounters someone could have with a *bean feasa*. The first is that they were forced to resort to her as possible help and the second was that the people who were seeking her were afflicted by a misfortune that was obscure and mysterious in nature that could not be cured in any other way.[228] Apart from the powers that can be inferred from the list of titles for the wise woman character, she was also gifted with the second sight and thus could foresee events or find the root of a person's aliment.[229] The wise woman also had a status as a shifting, multi-locational presence and this was shown in three ways.[230] There was first the travelling woman – an itinerant, second there was the woman who was settled in the community but traveled often with fairy hosts and was present at many places at many times and finally there was the wise woman who was present in one way or another at different far away locations, also described as the multi-locational omnipresent territorial Sovereignty Queen.[231] The Sovereignty Queen, which was a character from medieval literature, was thought to personify territories and kingdoms.[232] This is similar to the way that Mary was seen to personify the victorious Church.

In wise woman legends there were two types of crises that would cause people to seek out a wise woman. First there were the small domestic crises, such as an animal that had been lost, stolen or strayed, or a shortage of substances like butter or tobacco, second there was the

[227] O Crualaoich, 40.
[228] O Crualaoich, 40
[229] O Crualaoich, 37.
[230] O Crualaoich, 41.
[231] O Crualaoich, 41.
[232] O Crualaoich, 41

need to cure the mysterious illness of a human or animal.[233] Now that an explanation of what a wise woman has been given, an analysis of passages from Brigit's hagiographies where she is cast as a wise woman will be examined.

One of the first examples of Brigit being cast as a wise woman is found towards the beginning of Cogitosus' life. The episode in question casts Brigit as a wise woman because it showcases the second type of crisis a wise woman would deal with, in particular, curing an aliment. This scene shows Brigit curing a young girl "who was dumb from birth."[234] What is interesting about this passage is that not only does it show Brigit as a *bean leighs* ("woman of healing"), it also strongly reflects a *bean feasa* legend. At the beginning of his article, "Reading the *Bean Feasa*", Gearoid O Crualaoich cites a legend where a "woman (…) who used to be giving out knowledge" cures a girl who had lost her speech.[235] This legend, taken from the archive of the Irish Folklore Commission, is one of many of this sort from the archive and thus can be seen to be representative of the genre. By having Brigit perform an act of healing that was among the stock stories of the wise woman legends, a clear connection between the two and the casting of Brigit as a wise woman is accomplished.

This wise woman casting is also found in the *VP*. In one particular section of the *VP*, Brigit is asked to help when a calf has strayed. The story states that while on their way to bring a cow and her calf to Brigit, a mother and her daughter lost the calf.[236] When they arrived, Brigit told them not to worry that the calf would come back, which it did.[237] This passage illustrates Brigit being a wise woman in two ways. First, even though they were on their way to see Brigit already, the mother and daughter did seek her aid in the case of the strayed calf. Seeking out a

---

[233] O Crualaoich, 42.
[234] Cogiotsus, 16.
[235] O Crualaoich, 37.
[236] *VP*, 27:1.
[237] *VP*, 27:3.

wise woman in the crisis of a strayed animal is classified as a small crisis, one of two types of crises that would cause people to seek out a wise woman. Secondly, Brigit is cast as a wise woman in this passage because it is suggested that Brigit has the gift of second sight because she knew that the calf would return.

The gift of second sight is found in another scene in the *VP*. In chapter 33, Brigit who was travelling – another *bean feasa* trait which will be examined – stops by the roadside and stays there while instructing her nuns: "Dig under the sod nearby so that water may gush forth. For there are people coming along who have food but are thirsty since they have nothing to drink."[238] After the nuns dug up the sod and accessed the water, disciples of Patrick's arrive and state that they have food but no water,[239]exactly as Brigit predicted.

The scene quoted above shows Brigit being cast as a wise woman because she displayed the gift of second sight, foreknowledge. It also touches upon another characteristic of the wise woman displayed by Brigit: travelling. Earlier in this paper the three types of status of a wise woman were discussed and they were as follows: the travelling woman/an itinerant, the settled wise woman who travels often with a fairy host and finally the Sovereignty Queen figure who is multi -locational.[240] All three aspects are present in these narratives. Firstly, she is often moving around Ireland and this is illustrated in her *vitae*, in particular the *VP* and *BB* where she seems to be travelling more then she is stationary. An example of this is found in the topographical frame work of the BB. During the course of the BB, Brigit travels all over the southern part of Ireland visiting such places as Connacht, Munster and her father's land in Ui Fhailgi as a baby and child.[241] Her adult life if marked by her taking the veil in Mag Tulach and journeys through

---

[238] *VP*, 33:3.
[239] *VP*, 33:5
[240] O Crualaoich, 41.
[241] *BB* 1-14.

Mide, Tethbae, Tailtiu in Brega and Leinster, her home territory.[242] All of these voyages clearly show Brigit being an itinerant.

Cogitosus casts her more as having the second type of wise woman status, having a base but travelling often. This is reflected in the passages where Cogitosus details all the "poor people and pilgrims (…) flocking to her from all sides(…)" and then passages where he describes Brigit travelling to go and save people who needed her help.[243] These examples illustrate how Brigit was settled in a community but also travelled. Of course it is not a fully accurate representation of a wise woman because Brigit did not travel with a fairy host but nonetheless the people hearing this *vita*, who would have been familiar with the wise woman legends, would have seen the connection.

The third type of status a wise woman could have, that of Sovereignty Queen is also illustrated in Brigit's hagiographies. In the *VP*, there is one section in particular that promotes Brigit as a Sovereignty Queen figure. This scene, which was quoted from earlier in the Mary and hero sections, is the scene where Brigit comes to the aid of a king in battle. This passage shows Brigit appearing out of nowhere, riding into battle and protecting a king, his kingdom and his territory.[244] Brigit is cast as a Sovereignty Queen in this excerpt for two reasons. Firstly, there is the allusion that Brigit is in two places at once. Since she appears, fights then disappears, the interpretation of this apparition is that she is multi-location and omnipresent. She was present in one way at this battlefield while she was probably present in another way somewhere else, somewhere far away. This interpretation sees Brigit being giving the status of a Sovereignty Queen. The second way in which Brigit is seen as a wise woman with the status of a Sovereignty Queen is in the way that Brigit personifies the kingdom by being the protector and winning the

[242] *BB* 14-46.
[243] Cogitosus, 15:2, 20:4-5.
[244] *VP*, 88:5-7.

battle. Brigit being cast as a Sovereignty Queen is also similar to Brigit being cast as a type of Mary, in particular Mary as a victorious queen. Since this passage is one of many from the *VP* that showcases Brigit's layered and dynamic gender transformations, this is the opportune place to start the analysis of Brigit's gender transformations.

Brigit's Gender Transformation

As has been shown in this chapter, Brigit's hagiographers cast her in many roles. From Jesus and Mary typologies to the hero and *bean fesa*, Brigit's gender is seemingly always changing in her *vitae*. In Cogitosus' *vita*, Brigit is portrayed as both a type of Jesus and a saintly hero, with a stress on her virtuous nature. In the *Vita Prima,* Brigit is coded using both the Jesus and Mary typology. She is coded as a *bean feasa* and a folkloric hero. In the *Bethu Brigte*, she is shown mainly as a wise woman with a subtle Jesus typology present. In certain key scenes from the *VP,* the birth and the death scene for example, the interpretation of Brigit is coded in two or more typologies at once. Her birth can be interpreted as similar to Jesus' life pattern and the hero's life pattern. It also provides her with a liminal nature, thus making her a type of Mary. Her death scene can be interpreted as casting her as a type of Mary and a hero. Yet another scene, one where she is seen "(…) going before him into battle with her staff in her right hand and a column of fire was blazing skywards from her head. Then the enemy were routed (…)"[245] casts Brigit as a Mary typology, as a hero and as a Sovereignty Queen. These, and the many other examples highlighted in the beginning of this chapter show how Brigit moves along the gender spectrum often, many times being coded in both a traditional male and female typology. The question that needs to be asked now is what do these numerous and at times seemingly inconsistent moves mean? In order to answer that question, it is necessary to compare Brigit's

[245] *VP*, 88:6.

gender transformations with the gender transformations that came before her in the Christian tradition, namely Blandina and Perpetua.

The first transformation to be examined is Blandina's since hers was the earliest account to detail a process of transformation. Blandina's gender transcendence happened during the physical trials that she underwent during her martyrdom in the year 177 C.E. The actual transformation, where Blandina is seen as a type of Christ, does not happen till almost the end of the account about the martyrs, yet there is a gradual building up to it. It is said that Blandina " (…) demonstrated her love for God in dynamic action, not in empty boasting" and that the other martyrs were worried whether or not Blandina could withstand the torture because of her "physical frailty" and not be able to make a bold confession of faith but that "(…) she was filled with such power that even those taking turns to torture her in every possible way from morning till night had to admit defeat."[246] This passage highlights the beginning of the transcendence process because Blandina is actually overcoming her weak earthly body and the pain being inflicted on it and is instead "renewed in her vigor through her confession of faith."[247] The actual moment of transformation happens when Blandina is hung from a stake and used as bait for wild animals. It is written that she hung there in the form of a cross and that the other martyrs "In the midst of their anguish, through their sister it seemed to them that they saw with the eyes of their bodies, him who was crucified for them so that he might convince those who believed in him that all who suffer for Christ's glory will have eternal fellowship with the living God."[248] This passage highlights the actual transformation itself but it also showcases a key element of Blandina's transformation. Blandina's moment of transformation was experienced by others. She did not see herself as Jesus, her fellow martyrs did. So to summarise, Blandina overcame her

[246] Bright, 41.
[247] Bright, 41.
[248] Bright, 45.

weak physical body by withstanding multiple forms of torture, and transcended to a level where she experienced a transformation, a Christ crucified and witnessed by others. This is a very significant moment in Christianity because it witnesses that disciples, both men and women, can represent Christ in some of the most solemn moments of faith-life. This is different from Perpetua's transformation.

Though many of the circumstances between Blandina's and Perpetua's martyrdoms are similar, the key difference is the transformation Perpetua underwent. Perpetua, just like Blandina, was being persecuted because of her Christian beliefs and eventually died for them. Both women were young, showed great feats of spiritual strength and were mothers; Perpetua in the traditional biological sense, she had a son, and Blandina in a spiritual sense; she was a mother figure to the other Martyrs of Lyon.[249] Perpetua however wrote of her own trials and it is through her first person accounts that the information about her transcendence and transformation has been preserved.

In the part of the account that Perpetua wrote, she recounts four visions she had while in prison. After the first vision, one that involved the martyrs climbing a ladder into heaven, Perpetua realized that she was "to experience the sufferings of martyrdom. From then on we gave up having any hope in this world."[250] This passage marks the beginning of Perpetua's own awareness of a transformation process because it is after she has come to terms with her death that she starts to transcend gender cultural restrictions. This vision in itself is the beginning of Perpetua's transcendence since in it she leaves the human world behind, overcomes her obstacle

[249] "As for the blessed Blandina, last of all, like a noble mother having encouraged her children and sent them on before her in triumph to the King, she herself set out on the path of her children's suffering, hastening towards them, rejoicing and exulting because of their own exodus as one being invited to a bridal feast rather than one being thrown to the beasts." – Bright 48. The noble mother reference is a reference to the mother in 2 Macc. 7:20-23, who watched her seven sons die yet was filled with a noble spirit and "reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage". This is particularly interesting to the study of gender transformation because this is biblical woman who took on a manly characteristic – a man's courage – and thus sets a precedent for all forms of gender transformation.
[250] Perpetua, 4:3.

(the dragon) and ascends to a garden where she takes communion with a man that is coded as Jesus.[251]

The stages leading up to Perpetua's transformation continue with Perpetua gaining freedom from a human earthly problem. When Perpetua was arrested she had an infant son that needed her and his wellbeing was a profound concern for her. Perpetua was "aggravated by my anxiety for my baby", a condition that was relieved when she was allowed to have the baby stay with her in prison.[252] All of this changed however when her son was taken from her and Perpetua was caused physical pain due to not being able to nurse. However, she transcended this very earthly state when "God saw to it that my child no longer needed my nursing, nor were my breasts inflamed. After that I was no longer tortured by anxiety about my child or by pain in my breasts."[253] This is an interesting passage for multiple reasons. The most interesting aspect of this passage is that by no longer feeling the physical pain of not nursing and no longer being anxious about her son and his well being, Perpetua transcended her "weak" physical state. This freedom from earthly bonds allows Perpetua to greet her martyrdom without fear and without any earthly bonds – such as her connection and worry for her son – holding her back. The freedom that Perpetua gains from this change leads into her gender transformation.

Unlike Blandina, whose transformation was experienced by others, Perpetua experienced her transformation herself. In the fourth vision Perpetua had, she experiences herself transforming into a man: "I was stripped of my clothing, and suddenly I was a man."[254] As a man, Perpetua then went on to fight a gladiator and win. Something to be noted about this episode however is that the trainer, a character who seems to be in charge of the fight, still refers

[251] Perpetua, 4:2-4.
[252] Perpetua, 3:3.
[253] Perpetua, 3:3.
[254] Perpetua, 10:1

to Perpetua as a female using the pronoun "she" even after Perpetua has experienced her transformation.[255] This distinction draws attention to the fact the even though Perpetua might have transcended her gender and have experienced a transformation into a man, her sex is still the same. In other words, her gender can change and be transformed through acts of leaving the earthly things behind and behaving virtuously, so her soul can transcend but her sex will never change, she will always be a woman. This is important to remember when studying Brigit's gender transcendence.

Brigit's gender transcendence is different in many ways from the transcendence that Blandina and Perpetua experienced. The first difference that needs to be highlighted is the fact that Brigit's transformations, as presented in her hagiographies, are not experienced by herself, any of her contemporaries or her hagiographers. The gender transformations that Brigit undergoes happen in her *vitae* only. It is the reader/audience of the hagiography that experience Brigit's transformations. It is up to the audience to make the connections to the typologies – both Christian and Celtic – that Brigit is coded with and read Brigit as a type of Jesus, Mary, hero or *bean feasa.*

Since it is the audience who experience Brigit's transformations, the gender coding that happens in her hagiographies are often layered. This means that there are episodes in Brigit's hagiographies where it is possible to read Brigit being coded as more than one gender, more than one typology. For example, Brigit's birth and death scenes in the *Vita Prima* are all layered in gender coding. In the birth scene, Brigit is cast as a type of Jesus, a type of Mary and a hero. Brigit can be read as a type of Jesus because her birth fulfills prophecies, as a type of Mary because of the liminal nature – being born on a threshold – and as a hero for fulfilling prophecies

[255] "If this Egyptian wins, he will kill her with the sword; but if she wins, she will receive this branch." Perpetua 10:1 "He kissed me and said, "Peace be with you, my daughter."" Perpetua, 10:2

and being born on a threshold, thus making her birth unusual and fulfilling the criteria for a hero's birth. So the hagiographer who wrote the *VP* cast Brigit as a man in two ways – a type of Jesus and a hero – while at the same time aligning her with one of the strongest female personages of Christianity. By layering these transformations, the hagiographer is fulfilling the conventions of the Christian hagiographic genre while also making the hagiography uniquely Irish through the incorporation of Irish folkloric patterns. He is also creating a paradox in Brigit's gender. These gender paradoxes and layered transformations are also present in Brigit's death scene where Brigit is represented as a victorious hero and a victorious queen figure, similar to Mary as a victorious queen.

The *VP* is not the only Brigit *vita* to have seemingly varied gender portrayals. As was illustrated, Cogitosus cast Brigit as a type of Jesus through the use of stock biblical miracles and as a saintly hero by stressing her sanctity over her heroic qualities. What is interesting however about these mainly male gender portrayals is Brigit's relationship with her bishop Conleth. Right from the beginning of his *vita* in chapter five, Cogitosus underlines that Brigit, as a woman, needed a man. He writes:

> "… and as she reflected that she could not be without a high priest to consecrate churches and confer ecclesiastical orders in them, she sent for Conleth, a famous man and a hermit endowed with every good disposition through whom God wrought many miracles (…) in order that he might govern the Church with her in the office of bishop and that her Church might lack nothing as regards priestly orders."[256]

This passage highlights how no matter what gender transformations she underwent Brigit would always need a male associate. This is because no women were allowed to preach formally or perform the sacraments.[257] Even the most highly ascetic virgin abbesses and monastic founders could not escape the need for a man that society, and in this case religion, placed on them as

[256] Cogitosus, Prologue chapter 5.
[257] Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100*, 125.

women. As scholar Lisa Bitel explains, religious men could escape women and the temptation they represented by entering into the religious life because men could form self sufficient communities, whereas religious women were still dependent on men for many of their needs, such as the protection of a brother community or a priest to perform sacerdotal functions.[258] This need that Brigit had for a priest highlighted by Cogitosus casts Brigit very much as a woman of her time, a role that stands in contrast to Cogitosus' coding of her as a saintly hero. So just as Perpetua, even after having experienced her transformation was still referred to as a woman, Brigit too, can change her gender but never change her sex or fully overcome the restrictions that come with it.

The *Bethu Brigte* also creates an inconsistent picture of Brigit's gender. Unlike the *VP* or even Cogitosus, where Brigit's gender transformations are shown to be layered and she is seen as having to abide by the rules placed upon her sex, the *BB* takes a much more subtle approach to her gender. Brigit performs miracles just like Jesus does in the *BB*, thus keeping with the hagiographic genre, but the coding of her as a type of Jesus is not taken as far as it is in the *VP*. Brigit is shown to be a *bean feasa*, as evidenced through her itinerant ways but even that coding is minimal. Brigit's gender inconsistencies in the *BB* find their root in one particular scene, an episode that is among the best known stories about Brigit. The story in question is her "mistaken" ordination as a bishop. It is written that during her veiling to become a nun: "The bishop (Mel) being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognise what he was reciting from his book for he consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop."[259] This scene is key to the study of Brigit's gender because the role of bishop was reserved exclusively for men. Brigit being a bishop would have been a strong source of controversy and turmoil. What is

[258] Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 202.
[259] *BB*, chapter 19.

interesting about this scene is that according to Bitel, this scene was purposely included by the hagiographer because he wanted to cast Brigit as an ecclesiastical chief.[260] Her hagiographer wanted the reader to think of Brigit as a bishop, in order to help spread the power and influence of Brigit herself and her cult.

Another interesting point about this scene concerns what bishop Mel said after the "mistaken" ordination. Mel proclaims to the crowd that "This virgin alone in Ireland (…) will hold the episcopal ordination."[261] The point of interest here is with the word virgin. The hagiographer, through Mel's dialogue makes sure to once again stress Brigit's virginity because if she were not an ascetic virgin, she could not spiritually transcend into a man and thus not hold the ordination of bishop. This gender portrayal also marks Brigit as different among virgins since she is the only virgin allowed to be ordained.

All of the paradoxes in Brigit's gender portrayals in her hagiographies reflect the very nature of the society in which Brigit lived and that produced her hagiographies. In Chapter Two, the paradoxes of Celtic Christianity were outlined and to reiterate, they are as follows: the earliest Irish conversions characterized by continuities rather than discontinuities, the characteristic asceticism of Irish/"Celtic" Christianity that coincided with a love of nature, the arts and scholarship and the insular culture that was open to outside influence and in turn exerted its own influence beyond its shores. As has been shown, these paradoxes are often at work in Brigit's hagiographies. What is interesting to note is that not only did Brigit and her hagiographers live in a period marked by these paradoxes, but she is, as presented in her *vitae* a paradox herself. The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary defines a paradox as: one (as a person, situation, or action) having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases. In her hagiographies

[260] Bitel, *Land of Women,* 192.
[261] *BB,* chapter 19.

Brigit's gender is shown to have contradictory qualities. At one moment Brigit can be coded as a man, the next a woman, sometimes both, using typologies that stand in opposition to each other (i.e. Christian and pre-Christian folkloric). Due to the opposing qualities of her gender portrayals and the contradictions they create, Brigit could be interpreted as a paradox of Celtic Christianity herself. She is never fully male or female, she is never fully Christian or pre-Christian. She is instead a perfect blend of the two, where despite their opposing natures both sides come together to make an oddly balanced and often varied whole. One might venture to argue however, that this paradoxical nature that Brigit possesses, as the reason why she and her cult have survived the centuries and are still present and relevant, in modern times.

Chapter 4: Brigit Today

As time has progressed, Brigit and her cult have experienced movement as well. With every new era, the cult surrounding Brigit has evolved to meet the specific needs of this new period, making Brigit stand out as different from the many saints who have almost disappeared. A large part of this evolution lies with the people and the ways in which they approach Brigit. In particular, in the last half of the 20th century and into the beginning of this century, Brigit has been reclaimed by the Celtic Pre-Christian movement as well as the feminist movement. This chapter will look at Mary Condren and her book *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* as an example of feminist appropriation, the Brigidine sisters in the town of Kildare as an example of a Celtic Pre-Christian appropriation and finally at the Kildare Heritage Center and a work of fiction, *Brigit of Kildare* as examples of modern hagiographies.

Feminist Appropriation:

In terms of a feminist approach to Brigit, the book *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland,* by Mary Condren, a feminist scholar, stands as an example of claiming Brigit in a feminist view. The breakdown of Condren's book into three sections, places Brigit in a form of Trinity with Eve and Mary, two of Christianity's most controversial female figures, both of whom are often debated within feminist circles. The section dedicated to Brigit – "The Age of Brigit"- starts with two chapters that focus on Brigit the Goddess and the historical Brigit of Kildare, while the rest of the chapter explores female issues within the Church during the founding years of Christianity in Ireland.

In the first chapter – "Brigit as Goddess" – Condren examines some ideas of how Brigit the Goddess came to be popular and have her cult spread through Ireland. In her examination of Brigit the Triple Goddess, Condren connects her to some other well known goddesses from other

traditions. In particular, Condren states that Brigit can be linked to the Roman goddesses Minerva and Juno and the Egyptian goddess Isis.[262] The link between Brigit and Minerva is highlighted by similar rites performed by each goddess's cult respectively to honour her whereas Isis and Brigit both share a cow as a symbol and both Juno and Brigit are patrons to midwives.[263] These connections with other pre-Christian goddesses from different pantheons place Brigit in a series of strong female powers. Juno for example, was the Queen of the Gods in the Roman pantheon and Minerva was the goddess of wisdom, two powerful female symbols. The connections made by Condren however, are superficial at best. For example, the connection with Isis, the sharing of a cow as a symbol representing both goddesses, is shallow in terms of a connection since cows are viewed as sacred animals in both Indian and early Irish cultures.

Condren's feminist analysis of Brigit continues in the second chapter, "Brigit of Kildare". In this chapter, Condren explores the idea of the saint Brigit being a Christian appropriation of the Celtic goddess Brigit. As an example for her argument, Condren offers up Brigit's association with fire. There are many scenes in Brigit's hagiographies where there are flames that come out of her head and body and there is of course the single documented reference – Giradus Cambrensis – as well as the legends of her fire temple that make up the Brigidine folkloric tradition, where a flame was always tended by her nuns, leading to fire becoming one of Brigit's symbols. Condren explains the scenes involving flames by saying that it is a direct association with the goddess Brigit, and that the tending of the fire, another connection to the goddess Brigit is also connected to rituals that could have happened at Dun Ailinne, a nearby, well-known pre-Christian site that had ties to both the kingship rituals of pre-Christian Ireland

[262] Mary Condren. *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 57.
[263] Condren, 57.

and its religion.[264] These explanations are meant to strengthen the ties Brigit had to the pre-Christian community, to a time when the Church, represented by men, did not control the area. What Condren overlooks in these explanations is the fact that fire is a deeply rooted Christian symbol. The story of Jesus' disciples being baptised by the Holy Spirit, in the form of fire, found in the second chapter of the Book of Acts is an example of the Christian symbolism behind fire. The scenes where fire is coming out of Brigit's head could be just as easily interpreted as the Holy Spirit descending upon her, in particular in the episode where she is taking her veil.[265] Condren however, chooses to focus on the possible connection to the goddess in order to stress Brigit's feminist appeal.

Celtic Appropriation:

Apart from being claimed by the feminists, Brigit, in modern times, has also been claimed by Celtic revivalists. An example of this is found in the order of Brigidine nuns, in particular in the Kildare chapter. The Brigidine Sisters are a group of Catholic nuns founded on February 1st 1807 by Daniel Delany, the then Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin.[266] Delany started the group, which is inspired by the original 5th century monastery of St. Brigit of Kildare, in order to provide Catholic education.[267] These roots of social concern are seen in the Kildare chapter of the sisters.

Despite being established in 1807 and setting up chapters all over Ireland and the world, the Brigidine sisters did not "return" to Kildare till late in the 20th century. According to their website, "We Brigidines came to live in Kildare in August 1992, to reconnect with our Celtic

---

[264] Condren, 65-66.
[265] *VP* 20:2 – "Then he ushered them into the bishop's presence, and while bishop Mel was gazing intently at them, a column of fire suddenly appeared rising from Brigit's head up to the very top of the church in which she dwelt." *BB* 19 – "While she was being consecrated a fiery column ascended from her head."
[266] Brigidine Website - http://www.brigidine.org.au/index.cfm
[267] Brigidine Website - http://www.brigidine.org.au/index.cfm

roots and to reclaim Brigit of Kildare in a new way for the new millennium."[268] This quote clearly shows how the Kildare chapter are interested in the Celtic roots surrounding Brigit and reclaiming her, thus indicating a possible Celtic appropriation of Brigit.

This Celtic appropriation of Brigit, which was evident in the festivities surrounding *Feile Bride* 2012 and experienced by this writer, is a result of many years of hard work within Kildare by the Brigidines to bring Brigit back into the limelight. After their arrival in late 1992, the Brigidines set about "reclaiming" Brigit, starting with the relighting of Brigit's flame - a candle that is always lit and taken care of by the sisters – in early 1993.[269] This relighting connects the Kildare sisters with the original Brigit's flame, said to be lit by Brigit herself and maintained by her nuns (and Brigit) after her death. The significance of the flame is important because due to its pre-Christian/Celtic connections, the relighting of the flame can be interpreted as a part of the Celtic appropriation of Brigit.

In the same year, the sisters started celebrating *Feile Bride*, a week long celebration surrounding the 1st of February, Brigit's feast day. These celebrations, in the last 19 years have grown to include a historical guided tour of Kildare, two cross-weaving workshops held in collaboration with the Kildare Heritage Center and *Cairde Bhride* –the Friends of Brigit – a lay society, a candlelight walk and vigil on St. Brigit's eve, a conference on social justice and a mass held at Brigit's well.[270] The Brigidine nuns also opened a pilgrimage center – which they are now expanding – and in collaboration with the town of Kildare helped commission and dedicate a statue in the Kildare Town Square called Brigit's Perpetual Flame.[271] All of these achievements

[268] SolasBhride Website - http://www.solasbhride.ie/
[269] SolasBhride Website - http://www.solasbhride.ie/
[270] SolasBhride Website - http://www.solasbhride.ie/
[271] SolasBhride Website - http://www.solasbhride.ie/

highlight how the Brigidines have lived up to their purpose in moving to Kildare to reclaim Brigit and bring her into a new millennium.

Apart from relighting Brigit's fire the Brigidines have also reconnected with their Celtic roots through the activities associated with *Feile Bride*, in particular the candle light walk and vigil at Brigit's well. The walk and vigil take place on Brigit's Eve – the 31st of January – which is the night that tradition states Brigit returns to earth. There are many traditions associated with Brigit's Eve, the most well known one being weaving Brigit's crosses. On Brigit's Eve this year, 2012, the walk commenced in a parking lot, one kilometer or so away, where a group, of about 150 people congregated.

The events for the evening started with everybody forming a circle around a hearth that had been made. A word of welcome from the Brigidine sisters opened the ceremony and was followed by a member of the *Cairde Bhride* leading the group in chants that were to be used during the walk. After practicing the chants, a member of the *Cairde Bhride* brought water from Brigit's healing well – as opposed to the garden well, the destination of the evening - which was ceremoniously poured into a "well" that had been set up next to the hearth. Once the water had been poured, the group was then blessed by the water. There was then a ceremonial weaving of a Brigit's cross in the middle of the circle next to the hearth. Once the cross was complete and a form of blessing involving the four cardinal points had been undertaken, the group of people, many holding their own lanterns and candles, followed the newly woven cross and Brigit's flame, through a labyrinth path lit by lanterns. While going through the labyrinth and walking towards the well, the group chanted what had been practiced earlier in the evening. Once everyone from the group arrived at the enclosure outside the well, they were led in a group song before proceeding into the well area for the final blessing of the evening.

The events that transpired on Brigit's Eve, as recounted above, illustrate how the Brigidine sisters are reconnecting with the Celtic past while at the same time attempting to reclaim Brigit and bring her into the new millennium. By bringing the ceremony outside, the sisters are reconnecting with the Celtic love of nature. They are also literally distancing themselves from the institutional Church liturgies in order to place emphasis on the importance of nature from a Celtic standpoint and by writing their own liturgy. Throughout the entire evening, there were no traditional prayers offered. Prayers and praise to Brigit were offered, but there was no "Our Father", no "Hail Mary", and no markers of the Church. By doing this, the sisters are highlighting the connection to their pre-Christian Celtic roots, thus providing an example of a Celtic appropriation of Brigit.

In addition to this, many of the songs, chants and "prayers" that were used have all been written in the last 10 years or so. Many of them are included on the CD "Gracious Brigit" that the Brigidine sisters helped produce, their years of composition mostly falling into the mid to late years of the first decade of the new millennium.[272] By using contemporary songs that highlight values associated with Brigit in a modern light (for example Brigit's love of nature and the eco movement) the sisters are bringing Brigit into the modern era and endearing her to the next generation. This can be seen as a modern appropriation of Brigit.

The Brigidines are not the only ones who have the goal of bringing Brigit into the modern era. The Kildare Heritage Center –the local history and tourist information center – also undertakes a form of modern appropriation of Brigit. Their appropriation however, focuses not only on Brigit, but also on Cogitosus, Brigit's only known hagiographer. The center, which includes an exhibit of historical information about Brigit and Kildare, as well as a gift shop focusing heavily on Brigit merchandise, has a video as part of its exhibit that is narrated by none

[272] Gracious Brigit CD

other than Cogitosus himself! This video, entitled "Land of Saints and Scholars: Stories of Kildare past and present" runs for about 10 minutes and features Cogitosus as the viewer's guide to Kildare past and present. Throughout the video, which includes excerpts from the *Vita Sancta Brigidae* as well as a tour of the Curragh and the race track, the National Stud stables, the Japanese Gardens and parts of Kildare town including Brigit's Cathedral, the parish Church and the market square, Cogitosus explains how important Brigit is and was to Kildare while making "ghostly" appearances at modern sites.

By placing Cogitosus, and ultimately Brigit, at the center of the video, the Heritage Center is reclaiming Brigit and making her available to modern audiences. They are also, in a way, using Cogitosus to write a new hagiography. In Cogitosus' hagiography, Brigit is the focal point but Kildare also holds a very important secondary role. Even though he never mentions Kildare by name, there are many passages in his hagiography where Cogitosus describes in detail the importance of the monastic settlement.[273] In the video, the roles are slightly altered, with Kildare holding more importance than Brigit. This illustrates how by using Cogitosus in his hagiographer role, the Heritage Center has provided Kildare with a modern visual hagiography of Brigit, and indirectly, of Kildare. Just as Cogitosus' interest in promoting Kildare is evident in his hagiography, the Heritage Center's interest in promoting Kildare is evident in their movie.

Brigit in Popular Culture:

Modern appropriations of Brigit are not limited to Kildare however nor are they limited to academically geared audiences. There are in fact some modern appropriations of Brigit that are geared towards the general population, for example, a 2009 novel written by Heather Terrell called *Brigit of Kildare*. This novel, a fictional recounting of Brigit's life and the possible origins

[273] Cogitosus, 32.

of the legendary Book of Kildare, though written for popular reading, does contain many of the key elements to Brigidine studies, in particular an exploration of Brigit's gender.

Brigit's gender is a major catalyst for the novel's story line. For example, the reason for the scribe Decius, being sent there is because Rome is looking for information to stamp out the supposed heresy within the Gaelic Church and choose to pinpoint Kildare as a point of conflict because the monastery is "run by a woman, Brigid, no less."[274] This quote illustrates how even for Brigit's "modern hagiographers", since Terrell could be described as such given that she is writing a story of Brigit's life, gender is key to a presentation of Brigit.

Through the examination of Mary Condren's book, the work that the Brigidine Sisters and the Kildare Heritage Center are doing, as well as Heather Terrell's popular presentation of Brigit, the different modern appropriations of Brigit have been highlighted. The insights gained from these examinations illustrate how easily Brigit can be adopted to illustrate and promote different images and ideas. One could argue that the facility of appropriating Brigit stems from the treatment of her gender in her hagiographies. Brigit's hagiographers made Brigit a malleable character, one minute promoting her as an ascetic devout virgin, the next a folkloric hero and then a wise woman. Brigit was always changing, a direct result of her gender. Women were in general undefined beings in the early medieval ages, so it allowed Brigit hagiographers to define her as they saw fit, much in the same way Condern defines her in feminist terms, while the Brigidines and Kildare Heritage Center define her in Celtic revivalist terms. As for Brigit's modern hagiography/confession that is found in Terrell's book, in following with tradition, Brigit dons many different faces, all of them linked to her gender.

[274] Heather Terrell. *Brigid of Kildare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009) 7.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined and analysed the many different components that influenced and helped to shape the multi-layered transformative episodes of gender transcendence that are present in Brigit of Kildare's hagiographies. The cultural and religious ideals of pre-Christian Ireland were explored while special attention was paid to the ways in which women were viewed. This study of the pre-Christian elements led to an examination of the coming of Christianity to Ireland, the conversion process and the ways in which it reshaped the cultural landscape of the era, the period which Brigit was born into and lived.

The exploration of the Irish Christian context and its impact on Brigit's hagiographies was paired with a study of the cult of the saints, the genre of hagiography and the Christian typologies used, such as those of Jesus and Mary. Irish hagiography as its own genre was also examined, with special attention paid to the particular characteristics of Irish hagiography, like the use of folklore and in particular the incorporation of the hero life pattern and the wise woman stock character.

Using what had been explained thus far in the thesis, Brigit's gender portrayals in her hagiographies were analysed. The coding of Brigit as Jesus, Mary of the Gael, a Hero/Saint and a Wise Woman were all examined, drawing connections between the different portrayals, the ways in which they stood apart from each other and the ways in which they overlapped. The layered gender coding of Brigit in her hagiographies and the movement she has on the gender scale, where at times she is portrayed as female, other times male, and sometimes both, show Brigit to be part of a tradition of women in the history of Christianity such as Blandina and Perpetua, who moved along the gender scale, yet also makes Brigit stand out due to the nature of her re-coding.

Throughout this thesis, one point has reoccurred constantly, after every argument. This point can be summarised as the following: Brigit is different. From the first observation about Brigit that catapulted the research for the thesis to the final conclusions about Brigit's legacy today, the constant element has always been the fact that Brigit is different and this difference is directly linked to her gender. Brigit was different in her world because she was a woman; an entity that men did not fully understand and thus sought ways to control and predict their behaviour. Brigit broke the mold however when she chose the religious life over the traditional predictable role of mother and wife. Brigit's list of differences grows as she stands out as one of the first female abbesses in Ireland and possibly the first monastic founder. As has been argued, these differences cumulated in Brigit becoming the first Irish born saint and one of the first female saints in Ireland. All of these differences made being her hagiographer a challenging project. As a result of this, and the fact that in Ireland hagiography, let alone the hagiography of female saints, was still a budding genre, Brigit's hagiographers presented Brigit as an ascetic virgin whose gender was coded in many different ways. The types of gender coding that are present in her hagiographies also help make Brigit different. Instead of staying with only Christian typologies, her hagiographers decided to incorporate elements of the pre-Christian Irish folkloric tradition, resulting in Brigit bridging the gap between male and female, Christian and pre-Christian, another way in which she stands out. Even though she finds company in the history of gender transformation and transcendence in Christian writings, she is different from Blandina's transformation through the eyes of others and Perpetua's transformation through her visions, as well because of the nature of Brigit's transformation, a transformation that is experienced and viewed by the reader and audience of her hagiography. All of these facts, when tied together, result in an image of a saint whose difference is directly connected to her gender.

Just as it is important to note all of these differences and examine the cultural, social and religious reasons behind them, it is also important to note that Brigit did have some contemporaries who also defied cultural gender roles and transcended the female side of the spiritual scale. On the continent there was St. Genovefa of Paris, who, like Brigit, helped change the landscape of her country by bringing Christianity to its people. In her book, *Landscapes of Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe*, Brigidine scholar Lisa M. Bitel writes:

> Both became saints while their countrymen and countrywomen were turning Christian. Both helped to convert others to the faith that was not yet dominant in Europe. They gained reputations for such holiness that learned men wrote their saintly biographies several times over. Both women became the focus of transregional cults that attracted pilgrims and sponsors from far beyond their local churches. While alive they swayed bishops and kings. After death, they continued to perform miracles for devotees at shrines named after them. (…) Most intriguingly, as I realized at Brigit's well, they were the same kind of saints: peripatetic, influential women responsible for building prestigious churches. Genovefa raised the first basilica at Saint-Denis and was buried in the new shrine of the Holy Apostles in Paris, along with her king and queen. Brigit founded a monastery at Kildare and was later laid to rest in its new basilica, (…)[275]

In highlighting the many similarities between Genovefa and Brigit, Bitel is illustrating how, despite standing out in their country as women who challenged the social traditions and helped usher in Christianity, Genovefa and Brigit were part of a small group of Christian women who were helping to change their country.

Genovefa was Brigit's continental contemporary but not her only one. Much closer to home, Brigit had St. Monenna, an Irish contemporary of Brigit. Dorothy Ann Bray discusses Monenna's manly spirit in her article "The Manly Spirit of St Monenna", where she highlights similarities and differences between Brigit and Monenna. As Bray points out, highly ascetic practices are not frequent in Brigit's early tradition, namely the three hagiographies examined in

[275] Lisa M. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints:How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009), xii-xiii.

this thesis (Cogitosus, *Vita Prima,* and *Bethu Brigte*) however they are very present in Monenna's hagiographic tradition. Bray writes:

> The Salmanticenis Life of Monenna focuses explicitly on her eremitical way of life, its physical hardships, and her actions to subdue her body. She undergoes severe fasts, although her nuns starve nearly to death. She removes herself and her community from worldly distractions, leaving a district because the noise of revelry at a wedding feast reminds her too much of earthly affairs. (…) she takes to desert places to engage in war against sin. (…) Her physical mortification allows her to sweat out spiritual battles with demons (as her hagiographers assert) and thus to conquer temptations.[276]

Because of the highly ascetic nature of Monenna's life, her hagiographers described her as having a manly spirit: "for she had a manly spirit in a woman's body."[277] This distinction means that though Brigit and Monenna were contemporaries, Monenna was actually described as having achieved gender transcendence whereas Brigit's transformation must be interpreted by the readers of her hagiographies. It is interesting to note however, that since Monenna is shown as having transcended her gender by her hagiographer in clear terms, it meant that the ideas surrounding gender transformation and transcendence were active in the early Irish Christian community, thus meaning that Brigit's hagiographers could have known about it. The presence of Monenna as a contemporary of Brigit's also shows that during Brigit's lifetime, there were a number of other women in Ireland, and as Genovefa illustrates, on the continent as well, who were challenging and changing the accepted social norms for women.

Despite the presence of contemporaries, Brigit did stand out as a woman but also as a religious woman in Celtic Christianity and as such she opened the doors to the many other female saints that would follow. There is little to no information about most of the female saints that followed Brigit in Celtic Christianity but there are a few who stood the test of time. For

---

[276] Dorothy Ann Bray, "The Manly Spirit of St. Monenna" in *Celtic connections: proceedings of the tenth international congress of celtic studies; Volume 1: Language, literature, history, culture,* ed. Ronald Black et al. (Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 173.
[277] Bray, "The Manly Spirit of St. Monenna", 171.

example there is St. Ita, a highly ascetic saint who lived in the 6th century and is often called *Secunda Brigida* or second Brigit because of the numerous similarities between the two women.[278] These connections exist because of Brigit achievements which set a precedent for Ita to be able to achieve them herself. Then there is St. Hilda of Whitby, an abbess of a double monastery who was so highly regarded in her time that she was chosen to host and oversee the Synod of Whitby, an event that would change the landscape of Celtic Christianity. Hilda stood out so much that she was immortalized and praised by Bede in the pages of his history. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* Bede dedicated a whole chapter in Book Four to Hilda where he writes of Hilda's extraordinary religious life. Bede states: "Christ's servant Abbess Hilda, whom all of her acquaintances called Mother because of her wonderful devotion and grace, was not only an example of holy life to members of her own community; for she also brought about the amendment and salvation of many living at a distance, who heard the inspiring story of her industry and goodness."[279] It is largely thanks to Brigit and the example that she set, that these women were able to enter the religious life and make their own mark on the history of Celtic Christianity. Just as Blandina and Perpetua were among those who set the precedent for women and gender transcendence in Christianity, Brigit stood as the example and guide for holy women in Ireland and the Celtic regions.

Brigit's influence and legacy did not end with the holy women of the Celtic regions however. As the Irish left their homes behind and re-established themselves in other countries, they brought their saints with them setting up churches dedicated to Patrick, Brigit and Columba all over the world. Though the focus of contemporary society is much less on the role of religion than during Brigit's life and the early years of her cult, the saints still provide a portal between

---

[278] Dorothy Ann Bray, "Secunda Brigida: Saint Ita of Killeedy and Brigidine Tradition" *Celtic Languages and Celtic People* (1992).
[279] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* trans. Leo Sherley-Price, (London: Penguin Book, 1990) 245.

two worlds. Instead of standing on the cusp of the worlds of the human and divine, saints now stand on the threshold of the past and present, providing a window through which people – scholars and lay people alike – can look back to see the ideas and traditions that formed the Irish Christian community, the survival of the Celtic traditions and the history of gender relations.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Books:

O hAodha, Donncha, trans. *Bethu Brigte*. Ireland: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978.

Parts of Books:

Bede. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Translated by Leo Sherly-Price England: Penguin Books, 1990.

Bright, Pamela, trans. "The Martyrs of Lyon" in *Early Christian Spirituality* ed. Charles Kannengiesser. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

"The Martyrdom of Perpetua: a Protest account of Third-Century Christianity". In *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church*, edited by Patricia Wilson-Kastner et al. 1-32. Washington: University Press of America, 1981.

Electronic Books

Schaff, Philip trans. "The Letters of St. Jerome in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II Volume 6* Grand Rapids MI.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.html, accessed August 6th 2012.

Forester, Thomas, trans. *The Topography of Ireland.* by Gerald of Wales. Cambridge Ontario: In parenthesis Publications, 2000. http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/topography_ireland.pdf, accessed August 6th 2012.

Journal Articles:

Cogitosus. *Life of St. Brigit.* Translated by Sean Connolly and J.-M. Picard. Ireland: Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1987.

Connolly, Sean, trans. *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae.* Ireland: Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1989.

.

Secondary Sources:

Books:

Bitel, Lisa M. *Isle of the saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Bitel, Lisa M. *Land of Women: Tales of sex and Gender from Early Ireland.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Bitel, Lisa M. *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Bitel, Lisa M. *Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400-1100.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Brown, Michelle P. *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland.* Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006.

Sellner, Edward C. *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*. Notre-Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1993.

Parts of Books:

Bray, Dorothy Ann. "Introduction." In *A List of Motifs in the Lives of Early Irish Saints.* 7-23. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1992.

Bray, Dorothy Ann. "The Manly Spirit of St. Monenna." In *Celtic Connections: proceedings of the tenth international congress of celtic studies*; *Volume 1: Language, literature, history culture* Edited by Ronald Black, William Gillies and Roibeard O Maolalaigh, 171-181. Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 1999.

Brown, Peter. "The Holy and the Grave." In *The Cult of the Saints: It's Rise and function in Latin Christianity.* 1-22. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Hughes, Kathleen. "Chapter 7 – Hagiography" In *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources.* 217-248. London: Sources of History Limited, 1972.

Johnston, Elva. "The 'pagan' and 'Christian' identities of the Irish female saint." *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, Edited by Mark Atherton, 60-78. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002.

Mayr-Harting, Henry. "Part 1: Kings and conversion, 597-664." In *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 13-116. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1972.

Murray, Jacqueline. "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" In *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, Edited by Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz, 34 -51. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

Sellner, Edward C. "Chapter 1 – Celtic Stories and Storytellers." In *Stories of Celtic Soul Friends*, 13-50. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004

Sellner, Edward C. “Chapter 3 – Brigit of Kildare: Pastor and Pioneer.” In *Stories of Celtic Soul Friends*, 91-130. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004

Journal Articles:

Auslander, Diane Peters. “Gendering the “Vita Prima”: An Examination of St. Brigid’s Role as “Mary of the Gael”.” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 20/21 (2000/2001): 187-202.

Bitel, Lisa M. “Do Not Marry the Fat Short One.”

Bray, Dorothy Ann. “The Making of a Hero: The Legend of St. Patrick and the claims of Armagh.” *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 145-160.

Bray, Dorothy Ann. “ Secunda Brigida: saint Ita of Killeedy and the Brigidine Tradition.” *Celtic Languages and Celtic People* (1992): 27-38.

Doble, G.H. “Hagiography and Folklore.” *Folklore* 54 (1943): 321-333.

Foley, Andrew J. “Shadows from the Celtic Past among the Irish in America.” *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 288-

Johnston, Elva. “Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography.” *Peritia* 9 (1995): 197-220.

Moutray Read, D.H. “Folklore and History in Ireland.” *Folklore* 29 (1918): 281-304.

O Crualaoich, Gearoid. “Reading the *Bean Feasa*.” *Folklore* 116 (2005): 37-50.