Agency, Consent and Loyalty

Michal daughter of Saul, and Royal Women in Middle Irish Literature[1]

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Abstract: This paper explores the depiction of women in the early Middle Irish biblical verse epic *Saltair na Rann*. Using Michal, the daughter of Saul and wife of David, as a central case study reveals the nature and extent of the anonymous poet's elaboration of their biblical source, with a creative and dramatic dialogue between Michal and Saul as the audacious centrepiece of that part of the narrative. This paper proceeds to examine some other female characters within the text more briefly, and concludes by tentatively placing some of the poet's concerns with female agency, marriage and royal daughterhood within a wider literary and political context which reflect the possible circumstances within which *Saltair na Rann* was composed.

Keywords: adaptation; Bible; family; gender; kings; marriage; Middle Irish; poetry; tenth century; translation literature; women.

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Saltair na Rann ('The Psalter of the Verses') is an Irish verse epic of salvation history composed in the late tenth century CE.[2] The text in its original form seems to

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[2] All quotations from *Saltair na Rann* are from the typescript of the unpublished edition and translation by David Greene, which is freely available on the website of the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies: https://www.dias.ie/celt/celt-publications-2/celt-saltair-na-rann/. See also Whitley Stokes (ed), *Saltair na Rann: a collection of early Middle Irish poems*, Anecdota Oxoniensa, Mediaeval & Modern Series 1/3 (Oxford 1883). All biblical quotations are from the Vulgate, using the Douay-Rheims translation, which is also freely available online: http://

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have comprised 7788 lines of verse, arranged in 150 cantos of varying length, hence its title characterising it as a 'psalter'. An additional twelve cantos, which bring the total text to 8392 lines, were not regarded by the scribe of the earliest extant copy as part of the 'body' (*corp*) of the poem proper.[3] The poem spans the full course of biblical time, from Creation to Christ's Ascension, if we accept the twelfth-century scribe's view of what constituted its 'body', with the narrative extending to the Apocalypse if we take the fullest version of the text. Despite this ambitious scope, the poet devotes a disproportionate amount of space — almost a sixth of the total text — to the life and deeds of King David. Within that lengthy Davidic section of the text, David's first wife, Michal, daughter of Saul and Ahinoam, receives extensive attention, including a particularly detailed and dramatic rendering of how she saved David's life when her father attempted to kill him. I have been unable to identify any exegetical or apocryphal intermediary source or sources that would account for the particular depiction of Michal in *Saltair na Rann*. At this point in my research I can only conclude that her characterisation — and the reordering of biblical narrative that enhances that characterisation — are the work of the *Saltair na Rann* poet. The poet imaginatively expands and rewrites Michal's encounters with her husband and father in ways that depart significantly from the biblical account and therefore may point to some particular compositional concerns on the part of the poet. This essay seeks to explore the characterisation of Michal in *Saltair na Rann*, both within the context of the portrayal of other women in the text, and also more broadly within the wider context of other medieval Irish depictions of royal wives and daughters.

Michal, Daughter of Saul and Ahinoam, Sister of Jonathan, Wife of David

Saltair na Rann (henceforth *SnR*) broadly follows the arc of biblical narrative, but the poet's choices in terms of inclusion, omission and expansion are extremely suggestive.[4] The depiction of Michal is a case in point. We are first introduced to

www.drbo.org. There are no surviving copies of the books of Samuel or Chronicles surviving from early medieval Ireland, but the evidence of other extant biblical texts suggests that the Vulgate — albeit with occasional sprinklings of *Vetus Latina* readings — was the dominant Latin biblical translation. I have silently altered biblical names in English throughout to conform to standard modern usage (e.g., Michal, Ahinoam, etc.). The medieval Irish forms are given as per Greene's edition; they provide important testimony for the rendering of Hebrew names in Irish: see Eleanor Knott, 'An index to the proper names in *Saltair na Rann*', *Ériu* 16 (1952) 99–122.

[3] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 502, saec. XII.

[4] There is surprisingly little scholarship on *SnR*, despite its epic nature and literary quality. Brian Murdoch has produced extensive commentary on sections of the text, identifying various sources and analogues, although he has not yet reached the David story: *The Irish Adam and Eve story from Saltair na Rann*, vol. 2: Commentary (Dublin 1976); 'From the Flood to the Tower of Babel: some

Michal implicitly in lines 5817–18, when we are told that Saul has promised 'his daughter' (*a hingin*) to whoever defeats Goliath. David responds that he will kill Goliath and will go to Saul 'so that I can take his daughter openly' (*co tuc a ingin cen clith*, l. 5827). Saul again promises 'his daughter' to David if he kills Goliath (l. 5839) and this is then followed by a detailed account of David's encounter with Goliath. The biblical account of this event does mention in passing that Saul will give his daughter to the victor over Goliath (1 Samuel 17:25) but it is not emphasised there to the extent that it is in *SnR*.[5] The fact that Michal is still nameless at this point may be related to the fact that, in the biblical account, Saul was initially intending to give his elder daughter, Merab, to David, but changed his mind and married her off to someone else. Saul is told that 'Michal the other daughter of Saul loved David' (1 Samuel 18:20) and this pleases him and he gives her in marriage to David instead. Although *SnR* does not mention Merab, it is only once David has defeated Goliath and proved himself in battle that Michal is finally named:

Iar sin tuc fo bríg búadaig
ingin Saúil śrethśluagaig,
Míchol mór, mó cach gaíne,
do hinchaib na ndagdaíne.

> After that he successfully married great Michal, of great excellence, daughter of Saul of the serried armies, with the pledges of the nobles. (5917–20)

This initial, rather conventional, praise of Michal's character is more intriguingly developed through the positive depiction of her that follows. The poet writes that Michal is supportive of David's close relationship with her brother, Jonathan, and in the phrasing of this the poet deploys what could be read as ecclesiastical terminology in order to articulate Michal's position in relation to her husband:

Dūthracair Mīchol cen meth
a bráthair, a airchinnech,
a mbith i cairddes cen dīth
– Ionathán ocus Dauīd.

> Michal desired without fail that her brother and her lord, Jonathan and David, should be in friendship without loss. (5941–44)

notes on *Saltair na Rann* XIII-XXIV', *Ériu* 40 (1989) 69–92; '*Saltair na Rann* XXV–XXXIV: from Abraham to Joseph', *Ériu* 46 (1995) 93–119; '*Saltair na Rann* XXXV–LXX: the Story of Moses', *Ériu* 69 (2019) 1–40. Relevant studies by other scholars will be cited below.

[5] For a detailed and nuanced commentary on the biblical account, see Robert Alter, *The David story: a translation with commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York 1999).

The use of the term *airchinnech*, the sole instance of the word in *SnR*, to describe David's relationship to Michal is intriguing. Although it can have a general sense of 'head' or 'leader' (Greene translates it as 'lord'), it is more commonly used specifically in reference to the land manager of ecclesiastical estates (eDIL, *s.v. airchinnech*). More speculatively, this ecclesiastical resonance may be amplified by the characterisation of David and Jonathan's relationship as *cairdes*: this can simply mean alliance, but can also refer to sexual love (which is suggestive, given the vast literature speculating on the precise nature of David and Jonathan's love for each other),[6] family relationship or kinship, as well as being used to refer to a particular form of spiritual relationship or affinity, such as that between a godparent and godchild (eDIL, *s.v. cairdes*). In contemporaneous Irish sources we see David cast explicitly as an embodiment of the Christian Church.[7] Perhaps there is some oblique reflection of that in the use of *airchinnech* to characterise David as, amongst other things, an ecclesiastical lord to his wife (and possibly in some sort of relationship of spiritual affinity with Jonathan).

Michal understands that David's relationship with her father, Saul, is a problematic one. From immediately after David's defeat of Goliath, Saul has been jealous of him, and has sought to make attempts on David's life. The account in the book of Samuel has Jonathan warning David about Saul's wrath in some detail (1 Samuel 19:2–7) before Saul is seized by 'an evil spirit' and casts a spear at David, who flees Saul's court (1 Samuel 19:9–10). However, in *SnR* this spear-throwing episode is moved to later in the narrative and instead at this point it is Michal, rather than Jonathan, who warns David that he will be in danger at Saul's court:

Ro gab Míchol, medar fír,
co trebar tinchosc nDauīd:
'Nī dechais fri slemna scēl
co rīg n-ergna Israhél.

Nā tēig cot diss, a gass glé,
co mac Ciss cen commairge;
ba baeth meni adair rún
– ná tabair toeb fri Saúl!'

> Michal, true joy, began to instruct David prudently: 'Do not go without matters being certain to the wise King of Israel.
> Do not go in mean guise, o clear warrior, to the son of Kish without protection; it would be foolish if he did not adhere to his decision — do not trust Saul!' (5949–56)

[6] Discussed in detail by Ruth Mazo Karras, *Thou Art The Man: the masculinity of David in the Christian and Jewish Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 2021), esp. chapter 2.

[7] Elizabeth Boyle, *History and Salvation in medieval Ireland* (Abingdon 2021) 74–82.

In *SnR*'s account, then, David does not go to Saul's court at this stage, thanks to the sound advice of Michal that David should not trust her father. Saul instead arrives at David's house 'in the appearance of peace' (*fri snúad sīd*, 5957): this represents another departure from the biblical account, where he sends his guards to watch David, but Saul's physical presence at David and Michal's home is necessary in the Irish narrative for setting up the innovative scene between Saul and Michal that follows. It is worth citing the biblical passage in full, in order that we can see how radically *SnR* adapts and elaborates it:

> Saul therefore sent his guards to David's house to watch him, that he might be killed in the morning. And when Michal David's wife had told him this, saying: 'Unless thou save thyself this night, tomorrow thou wilt die', she let him down through a window. And he went and fled away and escaped. And Michal took an image and laid it on the bed, and put a goat's skin with the hair at the head of it, and covered it with clothes. And Saul sent officers to seize David: and it was answered that he was sick. And again Saul sent to see David, saying: 'Bring him to me in the bed, that he may be slain'. And when the messengers were come in, they found an image upon the bed, and a goat's skin at its head. And Saul said to Michal: 'Why hast thou deceived me so, and let my enemy go and flee away?' And Michal answered Saul: 'Because he said to me: Let me go, or else I will kill thee'. But David fled and escaped, and came to Samuel in Ramatha, and told him all that Saul had done to him: and he and Samuel went and dwelt in Najoth. (1 Samuel 19:11–18)

Thus, in the biblical account, Michal helps David to escape, replaces him with an 'image' (*statua*), with goat's hair at the head, dressed in David's clothes, in order to deceive the guards and, when later questioned by Saul, claims that she had to help her husband because he had threatened to kill her otherwise. The author of *SnR* rewrites this scene radically in a manner that it is worth considering in some detail.

First, it is briefly noted that David escapes before Saul 'with great hatred threw a complete cordon around David's house; he closed like a serpent (*mar nathraig*) … around the stronghold of the son of Jesse' (5965–68). What follows, then, is an attempt by Michal to buy time to give David the chance to get as far away as possible from Saul. At first the author recounts the biblical scene of the creation of an 'image' of David. We are told that Michal collected a pile of linen cloaks and cloths and arranged them in a heap in her bed so that she made a 'likeness' or 'semblance' (*fúath*) of her husband from them. The poet praises her ingenuity, saying 'it was a cunning deed' (*ba hé in gnīm cass*, 5973) and describing Michal as a 'fair, cunning and truly crafty girl' (*a mbé findchass fíramnas*, 5974). Saul calls from the other side of the door, asking gently whether 'the son of Jesse' is there (5984). This is answered

with fourteen extraordinary quatrains of dialogue between Michal and her father through which, we are later told, she successfully 'delayed' Saul from going after David (6041–42).

Michal begins by echoing Saul's polite tone. She says, 'to appease him' (*dia chennsagud*) that he is welcome as a good father (*degathair*). Saul addresses her affectionately and asks her to let her husband come out into the custody of his guards (5989–92). Michal replies falsely, but provocatively, that David is in bed with her, 'between your daughter's arms' (*etar da láim th'ingine*, 5996). Saul retorts that, although her arms may be around the son of Jesse, she will not save him, and he addresses her as 'daughter of Ahinoam' (*a hingen Achinoÿm*, 6000), her mother's name. Michal responds by accusing her father of acting in a manner unbefitting a king in forcing her to betray her husband (6001–04). Saul responds, this time calling her 'granddaughter of Ahimaaz' (her maternal grandfather), saying that her tears will not help David. Michal replies, addressing her father as 'son of Kish' (*A meicc Ciss*), begging him not to 'extinguish … the head of valour of Israel' (*nā bāid … cenn n-erbāga n-Israhél*, 6011–12). Saul, by now addressing his daughter as 'fierce, warlike maid' (*a bé féme fechtach*, 6015), states that she cannot have David because he opposed Saul's own wishes. Michal appeals to Saul as her father and begs him: 'do not outrage your good daughter' (*nā sáraig do degingin*, 6020). She then changes tack, however, and proceeds to construct an astonishing litany of exhortation to her father, calling first on her brother Jonathan, then the prophet Samuel (both of whom are of course intimately involved in Saul's life), and then more abstractly on great figures of Jewish history — Moses, Joseph, Jacob — invoking them to urge her father to cease his pursuit of David:

Ná sáraig Ionathán uais,
co ngail gnáthaig, co rochrúais,
cen olc cen ainces cen díth
ro gab cairdes fri Duīd.

Nā sáraig Samúel fáith finn,
con-gab grādnual nār naebdinn;
nā sāraig cen gaísi nglór,
Maísi, Iosēph, Iäcób.

Nā bris bāig n-airech nō láech
nō ainech na fer fírgaeth;
nā gnáthaig nī as sía do scél,
nā saraig Día n-Israhél!

> Do not outrage noble Jonathan, with customary valour, with great bravery, without evil without harm without lack, who has made a treaty with David.

> Do not outrage Samuel the fair prophet, who has kept the ordered modest proclamation, of the holy heights; do not outrage, without a voice of wisdom, Moses, Joseph and Jacob.
>
> Do not break the undertaking of nobles or warriors, or the honour of wise men; do not pursue your matter any further, do not outrage the God of Israel! (6021–32)

The stakes are gradually raised to a dramatic crescendo, as Michal moves attention away from herself, and her own relationship with her father and husband, to her brother, Jonathan, and his alliance or affinity with David, to Samuel the prophet, a key figure in Saul's rise to kingship and in the transition of divine favour from Saul to David, to Moses, Joseph and Jacob, and eventually to 'the God of Israel' himself. In response, Saul addresses Michal merely as 'woman' (*a ben*) and tells her that even if she were to give him one hundred ounces of red gold he would not save David, at which point Michal — having bought David time — reveals that her husband is not there and has already escaped into the desert, because he was saved by God (6037–40).

This extraordinary addition to the story of David's escape from Saul foregrounds the relationship between Michal and her father, and the poet escalates the rhetoric between them with great mastery and subtlety. Saul's opening with unctuous flattery and the gradual disintegration and distancing of his relationship with his daughter over the course of the argument are cleverly conveyed, as he moves in his address from compliments, to 'daughter of Ahinoam', to 'granddaughter of Ahimaaz', to 'warlike woman', to anonymous 'woman'. By contrast, Michal begins with appeals to his fatherhood and to her own status as his daughter, but abandons this rhetoric in order to deploy lofty references to good kingship, to Jonathan's relationship with David, to Saul's Jewish forebears, and ultimately to God himself. This scene in *SnR* affords Michal a prominence she does not possess in the original biblical narrative and also places in her voice a broader critique of Saul's kingship at a point when Saul has, of course, fallen from God's favour and is beset by 'evil spirits' and losing his grip on power.[8]

This creative centring of Michal's character reoccurs at several later points in the narrative, though not to such an exceptional degree as in her dramatic showdown with Saul. The author of *SnR* moves from David's escape to an account of his relationship with Jonathan and in that context embeds the story of Saul casting the spear at David (so that it becomes Saul's second attempt on David's life, rather

[8] For insightful discussion of Saul's kingship and the withdrawal of divine favour, in the context of medieval Irish narrative literature and discourses of royal power, see Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's hostel: kingship and narrative artistry in a mediaeval Irish saga* (Oxford 2013).

than his first). Jonathan rescues David from Saul's palace and takes him into some woods (6081–84). Jonathan's anger at his father is expressed here and fits naturally into the broader context of this section's focus on his relationship with David. However, the poet inserts another reference to Michal at this point, saying:

Ferais Míchol debaid tinn
fri Saúl, fri Achinoīm;
nochorbo choimsech a cath,
ba toirsech, ba tromdebthach.

> Michal had a sore fight with Saul and Ahinoam; her battle was not moderate, it was sorrowful and hardfighting. (6089–92)

This is an intriguing image of a woman falling out with both of her parents on account of her father's treatment of her husband. We can understand why her relationship with Saul would be tense, given everything that has gone before, but the fact that she is explicitly described as fighting with her mother too is noteworthy: perhaps we are meant to understand that, just as Michal's primary loyalty is to her husband, David, so Ahinoam's primary loyalty is to her husband, Saul, rather than her daughter.

Having established how independent Michal could be, it is therefore all the more disappointing for the modern reader when it is revealed — in accordance with the norms both of biblical time and of tenth-century Ireland — that, of course, Michal does not possess the agency to be a fully independent woman. When Saul declares that David is banished from the kingdom of Israel, and David takes refuge in the kingdom of Moab, Saul uses Michal as a pawn in his dispute with David. The poet of *SnR* again reorders the narrative timeline. In the biblical account, we are only told much later that Saul 'gave Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Phalti, the son of Lais' (1 Samuel 25:44), as a kind of afterthought, after David has taken other wives. In *SnR*, by contrast, it is as an integral part of the account of Saul's war against David that the poet states:

Saúl iar selaib fri sním
do-rat mebail for Dauíd,
dia tardad Míchol fo greis
do Alathi mac Laïs.

> Saul, after periods of vexation, shamed David, when Michal was given by force to Phalti son of Lais. (6249–52)

Given what we have already seen of Michal's devotion to David, this quatrain accentuates the non-consensual nature of her marriage to Phalti, both explicitly

(Michal is married off by force, *fo greis*) and implicitly, because of the ways in which she has demonstrated so clearly in earlier scenes where her affections lie.[9] For a medieval Irish audience, Saul's voiding of his daughter's marriage contract could be understood as a declaration of war against David. Michal is made to be little more than a tool through which Saul can further injure David's honour. Michal's clear preference for David over her parents turns her father's callous disregard for her feelings into another indication of the way that his all-consuming rage towards David is damaging his relationships with his own children and indeed his kingship. The placement of Michal's marriage to Phalti at this point in *SnR* has the additional effect of indicating that David is no longer married to Michal when he encounters Abigail, who will become his next wife. This reflects a broader tension within *SnR* regarding the question of David's polygyny, which we shall return to in due course.

The poet devotes two further quatrains to emphasising just how great an insult Michal's forced marriage to Phalti is to David and to how the act is perceived as destabilising Saul's own kingship. Saul's own people, we are told, tell Saul 'vigorously' (*co lūth*, 6253) that he has made a grave mistake for which he will face divine punishment, and they continue:

Digēlaid do Día cech cruth
fort fēin, fort c[h]lainn, fort chiniud –

Dauíd fri dālgud nach dil
do ṡargud 'ma chētmuinter.

> Your God will wreak vengeance in every way, on you yourself, on your children, on your kin, for insulting David in respect of his wife in an arrangement which is not proper. (6257–70)

That Saul's own people tell him that he will be punished for marrying Michal off to another man yet again gives a prominence and importance to Michal's character that she does not possess in the biblical account. The use of the term *cétmuinter* (legal spouse) to describe Michal in this quatrain emphasises that David and Michal's marriage was a binding, legal union that should not have been flagrantly disregarded by her father.[10] The legitimacy of her 'marriage' to Phalti is thus called into question.

[9] For marriage, divorce, and the financial liabilities accruing from other types of sexual union, both consensual and non-consensual, see Charlene M. Eska (ed & trans), *Cáin Lánamna: an Old Irish tract on marriage and divorce law* (Leiden 2010), but cf. also the review by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha in *Celtica* 27 (2013) 182–86.

[10] For a full and systematic study of the term *cétmuinter*, see Liam Breatnach, 'On Old Irish collective nouns, the meaning of *cétmuinter*, and marriage in Early Mediaeval Ireland', *Ériu* 66 (2016)

The sympathetic depiction of Michal continues later in the narrative. In a brief summary of Saul's seven offspring, Michal is described as knowing her own mind (*mórmenmnach*, 6524; Greene translates this as 'of great courage', see eDIL *s.v. menmnach*, which gives definitions such as 'stout-hearted', 'self-confident', 'self-assertive'. However, the primary meaning of the parent noun, *menma*, is 'mind', and I would argue that the quality of *menmnach* is less about bravery *per se* and more an 'independent mindedness'). Once Saul is dead and his son, Ish-bosheth, has become king, the author of *SnR* tells us that David writes to Ish-bosheth requesting that Michal be returned to him. The poet echoes David taking the kingship of Judah (6557–58) with Ish-bosheth taking the kingship of Israel (6569–70), and as one king to another he asks Ish-bosheth to take his sister from Phalti and return her to her husband, David, which Ish-bosheth does reluctantly (6571–72). That Michal has retained her independent spirit and self-confidence during her absence from David is demonstrated in the final scene in which she appears in *SnR*, although the author's tone is more ambivalent towards her than previously. Ish-bosheth has been killed, his decapitated head brought to David, and the people of Israel have chosen David to be their king. David establishes the city of Jerusalem and goes, with thirty thousand men, to fetch the Ark of the Covenant and bring it to Jerusalem. He returns, accompanied by musicians and is dancing with the procession, 'like a jester clowning' (*amal drūth ic furseóracht*, 6684) as the Ark is brought into the city. Michal is watching and, the poet states:

Be degrach ro déc i-mmach
Míchol menmnach merúallach

forsin ríg, rēim cen dochta;
ba réil di a himnochta.

> It was angrily that courageous and foolishly proud Michal looked out at the king, a course without strictness, his nakedness was plain to her. (6685–88)

Again the author uses *menmnach* ('confident, stout-hearted') to describe Michal but pairs it with a negative term *merúallach*, which denotes a foolish level of pride or arrogance (eDIL *s.v. mer*; *s.v. úallach*). Michal seems here to have overstepped the mark, and what was previously an independence of spirit is now an immoderate pride. She reproaches David harshly, angering him (6689–90), 'so that David cursed Michal' (*co tarat Dauíd … a mallachtain ar Míchol*, 6691–92). There is no

1–29. Note that this work necessitates revision of Eska, *Cáin Lánamna*, cited in the previous note, so that instances in that legal text of *cétmuinter* should be translated as 'spouse' (and *adaltrach* as 'concubine').

further reference to Michal in *SnR*, a sad conclusion to the portrayal of an intriguing and compelling character.

Much scholarly ink has been spilled by biblical scholars, both medieval and modern, regarding the precise nature of David's transgression (if indeed it was a transgression) in dancing in the procession of the Ark and what exactly is meant by his 'nakedness'. The biblical account states that Michal 'despised him in her heart' when she saw David's dancing (2 Samuel 6:16; 1 Chronicles 15:29), and rebuked him, saying 'How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself before the handmaids of his servants, and was naked, as if one of the buffoons should be naked' (2 Samuel 6:20). David retorts that God has chosen him as king over Michal's father, Saul, and although the nature of David's 'curse' on Michal is not explicitly specified in *SnR*, in the book of Samuel it is stated that 'Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death' (2 Samuel 6:23). David clearly withdraws his affection from Michal, both in the biblical account and in *SnR*.

Various commentators have interpreted all this in different ways: some medieval exegetes suggested that the reference to David's nakedness 'did not mean total nudity, but rather not wearing the signs of kingship'.[11] Modern interpreters have argued that 'David was doing an erotic dance, seducing God, and may have been exposing his genitals to the slaves'.[12] However it is understood, David's behaviour certainly does not seem appropriate for a king, and yet Michal's rebuke is framed in negative terms. As Ruth Mazo Karras astutely observes, 'One might think that the church fathers might be inclined to agree with her that he behaved frivolously; but they found ways to explain why she was wrong'.[13] In *SnR*, I suggest, Michal's rebuke is framed as a strong-minded woman, who has proved herself to be ingenious, resourceful and loyal, crossing a line into an unacceptable level of pride, leading to anger, which causes her to be rejected by the husband to whom she has been so faithful at a moment when he is most bestowed with God's favour. Overall, the portrayal of Michal in *SnR* goes far beyond that of her biblical model. She is portrayed as a more fully-rounded character, fleshed out and expanded, and given words which demonstrate her independence from her father and her love for her husband, until that love is tested by David's frivolity. We can now attempt to place this characterisation within a wider context and draw out some of its possible meaning and significance.

The Women of *Saltair na Rann*

David is notorious for his sexual exploits, and Michal was the first of his many wives, not to mention his concubines. However, *SnR* obscures a considerable

[11] Karras, *Thou Art the Man*, 156.

[12] Karras, *Thou Art the Man*, 156, summarising the argument of Theodore Jennings Jr.

[13] Karras, *Thou Art the Man*, 156.

amount of David's sexual behaviour and the poet seems to exhibit an anxiety about David's polygyny. We have already seen how the poet emphasises that Michal was forcibly given in marriage to Phalti by her father while David was in exile. In *SnR* this information is provided before David encounters Abigail, his second wife, thus implying that he was not actually engaging in polygyny by marrying Abigail. Indeed, not only does the poet highlight the fact that Michal has been married off to another man, they also emphasise the length of time that David has spent in exile before he meets Abigail. He is described as being banished for a long time (6265–69) before the incident in which he encounters Abigail and her then husband, Nabal. Although Abigail does not receive the kind of extensive coverage devoted to Michal, she is described by the poet as 'a shapely and prudent woman' (*banscāl cruthach coemt*[*h*]*rebar*, 6296; a direct translation of her description in 1 Samuel 25:3). Abigail attempts to save the life of her husband, Nabal, thus demonstrating the same quality of matrimonial loyalty shown by Michal, albeit in a much briefer scene. David emphasises that Nabal would already be dead if Abigail (whom he calls 'wife of Nabal') had not come to him as peacemaker (6321–24). When Nabal eventually dies, ten days later, David takes her as his wife:

Iar sin tuc Dauíd cen dáil
Abigaïl mnaī Nabāil:

do-s-rimthos dó Día do nim,
co n-innmos, co n-innilib.

> After that, David took Abigail, Nabal's wife, without delay; God of heaven joined her to him, with wealth, with possessions. (6329–32)

The poet still refers to the widowed Abigail as 'wife of Nabal', but does make sure that the legitimacy of David's union is articulated: they are joined by God, and the appropriate material goods for a high-status marriage are brought into the union, reflecting medieval Irish contractual marriage practices. Since we have been told that Michal has been married off by her father to another man (with great emphasis placed on the insult done to David thereby), and that Abigail is a widow, the marriage is a legitimate one in the eyes of the medieval Irish poet, albeit not ideal in its circumstances, since the poet has already made it clear that David and Michal's marriage contract should not have been voided by Saul.

David has a great many other wives and concubines, but these are not explicitly noted by the *SnR* poet. One of his wives, Ahinoam of Jezrahel, is not mentioned at all. Bathsheba is only mentioned very obliquely, in the context of *SnR* accusing David of committing many sins. There is no depiction of David's lust for Bathsheba or any dramatisation of his role in Uriah's death: the poet merely states that, among David's 'many transgressions' was the instance 'when he took the woman

— recount it — when he killed her strong warrior' (*dia tuc in mnaí, do-rímid; dia ro marb a trénmílid* (6803–04).[14] An informed audience could understand that as a reference to Bathsheba and Uriah, although it is sufficiently vague that an unlearned one could possibly mistake it for a reference to Abigail and Nabal. The poet goes to some effort, then, to portray David as a great deal more monogamous than he was: only Michal and Abigail receive detailed attention, the former far more so than the latter. It is another woman altogether, however, who rounds off the poet's account of David's reign. This is the unnamed 'wise woman' who saves the city of Abel-beth-maachah. Sheba son of Bichri, the Benjaminite, led a revolt against David. David sent Joab and his armies in pursuit of Sheba, who was ensconced in Abel-beth-maachah, and David's forces besieged the city. The 'wise woman' (2 Samuel 20:16) tells Joab that the citizens are loyal to David and do not want Sheba to be sheltering in their city. She negotiates with Joab and gets him to agree that if the people of Abel-beth-maachah kill Sheba, and throw his head over the wall, David's armies will spare the city. The woman is afforded some prominence in the biblical narrative, where she states 'Am not I she that answer truth in Israel, and thou seekest to destroy the city, and to overthrow a mother in Israel?', to which Joab replies 'God forbid, God forbid that I should' (2 Samuel 20:19–20). In *SnR* she is an equally prominent character, described likewise as a 'wise woman' (*banscāl ecnaid*, 6961), and she also calls on Joab to spare the city:

> A Iōb, it foimsid fri síd,
> a choimsid for slóg nDuíd;
>
> nā himbeir luinni co lén
> for muimmi mac n-Israhél.
>
> Joab, you are a calculator of peace, o controller of David's army; do not wreak sorrowful wrath on the foster-mother of the Children of Israel. (6969–72)

In *SnR*, it is through this peace, negotiated by a woman, at the walls of Abel-beth-maachah, that David's reign comes to an end and his sovereignty passes to his son, Solomon.

The prominence of certain women in the David story, as told in *SnR*, is consonant with what we see elsewhere in the text. *SnR*'s striking depiction of Eve was discussed in some detail by Kate Louise Mathis in a 2011 study. Mathis observed that Adam is depicted as 'incomplete' until he is presented with Eve: 'Nor is Eve

[14] Cf. the tenth-century Irish prose narrative that creatively recounts David's role in the death of Uriah: Boyle, *History and Salvation*, 61–64.

portrayed as the lesser half of the couple, made from an already whole Adam', rather it is only when Eve was 'chosen' by Adam that his body was 'complete', 'his "true body" united'.[15] The amplified and complex 'Temptation' scene also casts Eve in a more nuanced light, as does the scene depicting Adam and Eve's atonement, in which Eve's intelligence and capacity for reason are emphasised.[16] Intriguing depictions of other women in *SnR* would repay further study, including the detailed description of Mary (7501–52), and the briefer references to Susanna (7357–60) and Mary Magdalene (745–48), amongst others. It is notable that, contrary to prevailing medieval Irish custom, characters in *SnR* are named in relation to their mothers as well as their fathers (we have already noted above when Saul calls Michal 'daughter of Ahinoam', but see also the depiction of John the Baptist, for example, who is named in relation to both his father, Zechariah, and his mother, Elizabeth, 7485–88). In contrast, I have argued elsewhere that the roles of the wives of the Patriarchs are downplayed in *SnR* and that relatively little attention is devoted to Sarah, wife of Abraham, or to Rebecca, wife of Isaac.[17] This may also be a result of tension regarding polygynous marriage practices, however, since Rebecca is accorded a significant amount of attention as mother of Jacob (rather than as wife of Isaac) in the lengthy scene in which she helps her son to disguise himself as his brother, Esau (2837–56).

One final aspect of the depiction of women in *SnR* might be noted. Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh has discussed cantos 138–41 of *SnR*, which she characterises as litany-like prayer-formulae. She suggests that the placement of 'prayers' or 'litanies' may have had a narrative function of being highly-condensed 'plot synopses' or reminders of what would have been perceived as earlier aspects of salvation history that were now being 'fulfilled' in the 'New Testament' sections of *SnR*.[18] Of those four cantos, 138–40 deal with predominantly (though not entirely) male figures, including Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and David (but also Susanna, 7357–60; Mary Magdalene, 7405–09; and the apocryphal St Thecla, 7409–12). Canto 141 (7465–85), however, is devoted entirely to women, referring over the course of five quatrains to Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Esther, *Conra* (thought by Greene to be a corruption of Deborah), Judith, Anna, Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene. In amongst the litany of paradigmatic women, the penultimate quatrain contains no names at all. Rather, it states:

[15] Kate Louise Mathis, 'Gaelic *gemina opera*? The verse and prose texts of *Saltair na Rann* and *Scél Saltrach na Rann*', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 28 (2011) 1–20: 4–5.

[16] Mathis, 'Gaelic *gemina opera*?', 6–7 (Temptation), 10–12 (Atonement).

[17] Boyle, *History and Salvation*, 36.

[18] Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, 'Poems 138–41 in *Saltair na Rann*', in Dónal Ó Baoill et al. (eds), *Saltair saíochta, sanasaíochta agus seanchais: a Festschrift for Gearóid Mac Eoin* (Dublin 2013) 297–310: 299–301.

Rī roda saer ōs cech treib
ar cech n-olc, ar cech n-erbaid

slúag na noebúag imma-sech
la slúag na mban n-athergech.

> The King saved them beyond every people, from every evil, from every harm; the host of the holy virgins in turn with the host of the repenting women. (7477–80)

Holy virgins and penitent women both formed important parts of many medieval Irish ecclesiastical communities, and when one reads this quatrain it is clear that, whatever we might suggest about the rest of *SnR*, canto 141 would have spoken with great resonance to many women religious.

Through the specific detailed case study of Michal, and a briefer consideration of other women in *SnR*, we can see female characters being depicted in a nuanced and creative manner throughout the text. The poet departs from the biblical model and rearranges narrative timelines in order to emphasise certain character traits and elide issues that might be regarded as problematic in medieval Irish society. There is a concern with consensual marriage in which the appropriate legal contracts are made before God. Matrimonial loyalty is highlighted as a particular virtue, even in the face of less-than-virtuous husbands. Turning now to the broader corpus of early Middle Irish literature, we can attempt to place these features into their cultural and historical context.

Royal Wives and Daughters in Middle Irish Literature

Roughly contemporaneous with *SnR* is the early Middle Irish tale *Tochmarc Ailbe* ('The Wooing of Ailbe').[19] This begins with a brief reference to the unhappy marriage between Finn mac Cumail and Gráinne, daughter of the king, Cormac mac Airt. Gráinne had been married off to Finn although she 'hated' him (*i miscin*), and had abandoned him for Diarmait. These events, although clearly circulating in tenth-century Ireland, were later reworked more dramatically in the sophisticated Early Modern Irish narrative *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* ('The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne'), probably datable to the thirteenth century. *Tochmarc Ailbe* (henceforth *TA*) picks up in the narrative aftermath of those events. Finn was 'formally divorced' from Gráinne (*ro-scarad Graindi tre coru fris*), and Cormac has given his blessing to any of his other daughters who wish to marry Finn. His daughter Ailbe 'of the Freckled Cheek', who is portrayed as intelligent

[19] Rudolf Thurneysen (ed), '*Tochmarc Ailbe* (Das Werben um Ailbe)', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 13 (1921) 252–82. Translations are from John Carey's unpublished translation.

and independent-minded, falls in love with Finn. The relationship of the king, Cormac, with his daughters, is an exceptional one in the context of early Irish literature, in the extent of the description of paternal affection. The author tells us:

> Et dina fa bes do Cormac, an tan no-gabdis caingni fer nErenn fris, orus imach fairccsin na hinginraide dogres ar met a seirci leis ⁊ ar feabus a lam do.
>
> Now, it was a custom of Cormac's when the disputes of the men of Ireland weighed upon him, to go [?] out and gaze on his daughters; for his love of them was great, and he marvelled at the work of their hands.[20]

While watching his daughters at their embroidery, he notices that Ailbe is distracted by the sounds of Finn's warband, rendering her handiwork crooked and uneven. 'Cormac noticed the maiden's blunder, and began to offer her advice' (*Ro-raitaigestar Cormac an ecmhuing lamdo do-gnid an ingen. Ro-boi oga teccosc*).[21] What follows is a twenty-quatrain verse dialogue between father and daughter, in which Cormac warns his daughter against falling in love with the aged Finn, and Ailbe extolls the virtues of an older man in contrast to reckless youths. Ailbe defends her choice of suitor against her father's warnings. Cormac grudgingly invites Finn to go to where the women are working and Finn engages in a verbal exchange of wits with Ailbe, comprising a riddling dialogue that shows the pair to be each other's intellectual equal. Finn notes that he cannot promise Ailbe the royal life to which she is accustomed: rather, he offers the outdoor life of a warrior, which she accepts through love for Finn.

The relationships between Cormac, Ailbe and Finn in *TA* are comparable to that of Saul, Michal and David in *SnR*. First, Finn's unhappy union with Gráinne, before he finds happiness with her younger sister, dimly recalls Saul's original intention to give his elder daughter, Merab, to David, before giving his blessing to Michal to marry him. More concretely, we have the verse dialogues between kings and their royal daughters in which, in both cases, the daughters assert their love for, and loyalty to, their (prospective) husbands over any obligations to their fathers. In both cases there is a concern for a woman's consent in regards to her marriage and the idea of female agency in her marriage choice, although in both cases we see also evidence that women are not independent (Michal's forced marriage to Phalti in *SnR*; Gráinne's unwanted marriage to Finn in *TA*).

Another, shorter, tale, contemporaneous with *SnR* and *TA*, is 'The Fate of the Sinful Greek Girl'.[22] Here we see a different take on ideas of female agency and

[20] Thurneysen, '*Tochmarc Ailbe*', 262; trans. Carey.

[21] Thurneysen, '*Tochmarc Ailbe*', 262; trans. Carey.

[22] R. I. Best et al. (eds), *The Book of Leinster*, 6 vols (Dublin 1954–83) v 1223; Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The fate of the sinful Greek girl', in Angela Bourke et al. (eds), *The Field Day anthology*

consent which, though also centring on a close royal father-daughter relationship, highlights the dangers of a lack of a woman's input in the selection of her marriage partner. In this tale, the daughter of a 'king of the Greeks' has been betrothed from birth to the son of one of her father's tributary sub-kings. The girl is brought up by her father, away from society, and educated to the point where she functions as his advisor. Here, as with Michal and Ailbe, we have a young woman portrayed as intelligent and independent-minded. However, this royal daughter engages in a sexual affair with one of the servants of the household, perhaps (as with Gráinne's lust for Diarmait) demonstrating the risks of women's partners being chosen without reference to the wishes of the woman. The Greek king comes to ask his daughter for advice, and inadvertently smothers the young man to death under the bedclothes, where he was hiding. The daughter disposes of the body, along with the herdsman she had engaged in the task of throwing the body off a cliff. Her betrothed then arrives for their wedding and she has to engage in further subterfuge (resulting in more murder) in order to cover up her lack of virginity in the marriage bed. When finally the Greek princess is able to exercise her own will about her fate, she chooses a life devoted to God, becoming, after repentance, a nun and, after death, a saint.

How might we interpret this emerging theme of the triangulated relationships between kings, their daughters, and their husbands, and the inherent tensions that might arise from those relationships? It is important to note that all three examples discussed here are imaginative literary depictions of different cultures and different times (ancient Israel in the case of *SnR*, prehistoric Ireland in the case of *TA*, and an imagined Greece in the case of the Sinful Greek Girl). If they are commenting on, or responding to, circumstances in tenth-century Ireland then they are doing so only obliquely. However, a case can be made that they do reflect something of the historical circumstances in which *SnR* and the comparanda I have presented here were composed. In early medieval Ireland, even royal women could not independently own land. If there were no direct male heir, a woman could own a life interest in land inherited from her father, but she could not alienate property, and upon her death the land would revert to the male kin. The source of a noblewoman's wealth was the property that she — through her father — brought to her marriage. The ideal, and most common, form of marriage amongst élites in early medieval Ireland was a 'union of joint contribution', into which the man brought his inheritance, and the woman brought a *coibche*, or 'bride-price', the value of which was calculated according to her father's status.[23] According to legal com-

of Irish writing, IV: *Irish women's writing and traditions* (Cork 2002) 119–21.

[23] Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Marriage in Early Ireland', in Art Cosgrove (ed), *Marriage in Ireland: the historical dimension* (Dublin 1985) 5–24, although note that Ó Corráin's statements regarding polygyny should now be disregarded in light of Breatnach, 'On Old Irish collective nouns'.

mentaries, the value of the *coibche* was equivalent to the woman's honour-price, which was half that of her father's (and after marriage half that of her husband's). Seán Ó Hoireabhárd has recently argued that, in the tenth to twelfth centuries, 'the link between *coibche* and a woman's honour-price, calculated as a fraction of her father's, must have impacted the wealth held by noble women of the highest class ... because ... the honour price of provincial kings inflated considerably between the codification of the law texts and the twelfth century'.[24] In other words, as kings grew richer, so did the amount of wealth their daughters brought to their marriages.

If the highest status women (of the sort represented fictionally here by Michal, Ailbe and the Greek Girl) were taking increasing amounts of wealth into their marriages in tenth-century Ireland than they had been in previous centuries, it is possible that they were able to exercise (slightly) more agency than before in having some input into their fathers' choice of husband for them. Ó Hoireabhárd elucidates cases in the eleventh and twelfth centuries — most notably that of Derbforgaill daughter of Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn, in the late twelfth century — where Irish royal daughters engaged in public displays of loyalty to their husbands, rather than their natal kin, using wealth that had been brought into their marriages as a result of their father's status.[25] We may be witnessing the beginnings of this phenomenon in the tenth century. And there is further evidence to suggest that, once a woman was married she was then being encouraged by paradigmatic literary examples such as the ones discussed above to remain faithfully in that marriage, as a steadfast and prudent confidante to her husband.[26]

Gregory Toner has argued in relation to the complex tale *Serglige Con Culainn* ('The Lovesickness of Cú Chulainn'), which survives in a single, composite Middle Irish version, that it, like *SnR* and *TA*, is concerned with the tensions between sexual desire and monogamy.[27] *Serglige Con Culainn* (henceforth *SCC*) again features an exemplary, intelligent and loyal wife, namely Emer, wife of Cú Chulainn, who

[24] Seán Ó Hoireabhárd, 'Derbforgaill: twelfth-century abductee, patron and wife', *Irish Historical Studies* 46 (2022) 1–24: 10. I am grateful to Dr Ó Hoireabhárd for sharing a copy of his article in advance of publication.

[25] Ó Hoireabhárd, 'Derbforgaill', 14.

[26] This would be comparable with ideas of 'queenship' in other medieval European societies. See, for example, Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in medieval Europe* (Basingstoke 2013); Janet L. Nelson, 'Medieval queenship', in Linda E. Mitchell (ed), *Women in medieval western European culture* (New York 1999) 179–207.

[27] Gregory, Toner, 'Desire and divorce in *Serlige Con Culainn*', *Ériu* 66 (2016) 135–66. The tale survives in one copy (in *Lebor na hUidre*), but two separate hands are responsible for the two textual layers. Scribe M first wrote the eleventh-century version of the tale. Later, scribe H, who clearly had access to an older exemplar, erased parts of M's text and replaced them with the tenth-century version (Toner, 'Desire and divorce', 136).

remains steadfast in the face of her husband's infidelity.[28] Emer is likewise characterised as independent yet faithful in the story of *Tochmarc Emire* ('The Wooing of Emer'), which Ruairí Ó hUiginn has also argued is concerned with marriage, loyalty and anxieties about the legal consequences of extra-marital sex.[29] In *SCC*, Emer's husband, Cú Chulainn, seeks to abandon her for the sake of an otherworldly woman, Fand, who has herself been abandoned by her own husband, Manannán, who has left her feeling embittered and sceptical of fidelity. Toner has argued that 'marriage, devotion and fidelity' are at the heart of the earliest (tenth-century) core of *SCC*, amplified in later (eleventh-century) reworking into a meditation on divorce and concubinage, as we see the emotional consequences of serial monogomy and infidelity.[30] These examples have been read in light of the phenomenon of the serial abandonment of royal wives by their husbands in the tenth and eleventh centuries: as new strategic alliances presented themselves, old wives could find themselves returned to their natal kin, marriage contracts dissolved, facing the prospect of being married off again to a new strategic ally of her family, or sent to a nunnery as a 'penitent woman'.[31] In this context, then, the portrayal of Michal in *SnR* can be seen as reflecting the circumstances of high status women in tenth-century Ireland, in ways analogous to Ailbe in *TA*, Emer in *Tochmarc Emire* and *SCC*, and the unnamed 'Sinful Greek Girl'. More broadly, though, across *SnR* we see multiple paradigms of femininity, not only that of Michal as royal wife and daughter, but also Eve, Mary, Rebecca, the unnamed peace-negotiator at Abel-beth-maachah, and many other women. And it is worth noting that none of those women fit into easy, reductive 'Madonna-whore', Mary/Eve dichotomies or caricatures, but rather offer more nuanced and fleshed out portraits which might engage women, both lay and ecclesiastic alike, in meaningful contemplation of the arc of salvation history.

SnR was composed in a historical context in which the highest status royal women were bringing increasing amounts of wealth into their marriages (as a direct consequence of the increasing wealth of their fathers, the provincial kings of Ireland). Contemporary authors were betraying anxieties about serial monogamy and the abandonment of royal wives by their husbands for political purposes, and were

[28] I continue to use the name 'Emer' for the sake of clarity, despite scribe H's tendency to call her 'Eithne', as indicated throughout in Toner, 'Desire and divorce'.

[29] Ruairí Ó hUiginn, *Marriage, law and 'Tochmarc Emire'*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lecture (Cambridge 2013).

[30] Toner, 'Desire and divorce', 162.

[31] The ease with which Irish élites divorced was criticised by various internal and external ecclesiastical observers: see, for example, Helen Clover & Margaret Gibson (eds & trans), *The letters of Lanfranc Archbishop of Canterbury* (Oxford 1979) no. 9 (Lanfranc to Gofraid mac Amlaíb, king of Dublin), no. 10 (Lanfranc to Tairdelbach ua Briain), as well as the discussions in Toner, 'Desire and divorce' and Ó hUiginn, *Marriage, law*.

composing literary works that foregrounded the relationships between royal fathers and their daughters, including the idea that a father's choice of a marriage partner for his daughter should be shaped to some extent by the daughter's own wishes. There seems, then, in the early Middle Irish period to have been growing awareness of the desirability of a woman's consent in marriage, perhaps aided by the increased value of a royal woman's marital wealth. Once married, however, a woman's loyalty to her husband should be absolute, her counsel wise but moderate, and her fidelity assured. Within that paradigm, as *SnR*'s Michal painfully discovered, a woman's agency did not extend to harsh criticism of a husband whom God himself had chosen as king.