



The Persuasive Power of a Mother's Breast: The Most Desperate Act of the Virgin Mary's Advocacy

Author(s): Salvador Ryan

Source: *Studia Hibernica*, No. 32 (2002/2003), pp. 59-74

Published by: [Studia Hibernica, Editorial Board](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20495136>

Accessed: 08/12/2010 10:05

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=stpatricks>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, a College of Dublin City University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studia Hibernica*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The persuasive power of a mother's breast: the most desperate act of the Virgin Mary's Advocacy¹

SALVADOR RYAN

(Dept. of History, NUI, Maynooth)

Depictions of the Madonna and Child, which for centuries have adorned Catholic churches and burial grounds, tend to evoke warm responses from the majority who choose to behold what appears to be an idyllic and peaceful scene. A variation of this theme, such as the portrayal of the Virgin Mary breast-feeding her Divine Son, although less common, has also claimed great popularity among iconographers from the first centuries of Christianity. However, some popular late-medieval interpretations of the latter depiction suggest that far from being a representation of a serene mother and child at one, the iconography depicts a veritable battle of wills. The mother (Mary) suckles her Son (Christ) in a desperate effort to appease His anger, thus hoping to offset the terrible judgement He plans to impose on humanity.

This paper explores the effect of the Virgin Mary's breasts on Christ the Judge, as understood in European popular piety of the late medieval period, and more specifically in Ireland. In the first instance, Mary employs her breasts to feed and nourish the infant Christ, calming His anger and setting Him at peace. However, when this method fails, she chooses to employ a more radical use of her breasts in a desperate effort to attain mercy for humanity in her role as Advocate, as discussed below. It is this second method, which is treated at greatest length here. An elaborate gesture of the Virgin Mary before her Son, popularised as a motif from the twelfth century onwards, is firstly traced to its pre-Christian roots. In addition, its subsequent manifestation across Europe, which includes an appearance in sixteenth-century Gaelic Irish bardic poetry, is explored. What results is an examination of one of the most fascinating religious motifs of the late medieval period.

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the Fourteenth Irish Medievalist Conference, National University of Ireland Maynooth, in July 2000. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences in awarding me a Government of Ireland Scholarship when this article was begun and a Post-doctoral Research Fellowship, which has enabled me to continue to explore the themes discussed therein.

I. APPEASEMENT BY BREAST-FEEDING

The image of the *Virgo Lactans* or *Maria Lactans* (the image of the Virgin Mary suckling the Child Jesus), which occurs as early as the third century in the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome, later spreading across Europe, is found in a number of Irish sources.² Becoming very popular, particularly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it is represented at least twice in an Irish context in the fourteenth century, namely on the Domnach Airgid shrine and in the Stowe missal.³ A variation on this theme is found in the Register Book of the Corporation of Waterford, 1566, where the Virgin is depicted as standing, holding the child in her left hand, away from her breast, which is exposed.⁴ More commonly, the Enthroned Madonna is found, where Mary is depicted as crowned, holding the child on her knee. The child points to the Virgin or lays His tiny hand on her breast, indicating that she is His mother. This image was known in Ireland as early as the seventh century.⁵ John Bradley has identified twelve depictions of the Madonna and Child on tombs, all dating from the sixteenth or late fifteenth centuries, while Clodagh Tait has identified a thirteenth – the Tullaroan Grace slab.⁶ The prominence of this image on tombs is interesting, in that it represents an acknowledgement of the role of the Virgin at the hour of death – namely, keeping her Son at bay while the rigours of judgement were implemented. While Mary holds Christ in her arms He appears subdued and less likely to exercise His judicial office. Mary, therefore, nurses Christ while her devotees pour into Heaven. This belief that Christ mellowed at Mary's breast is widely reflected in the religious works of the Gaelic Irish bardic order, a group principally composed of laymen. For instance, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe (*fl.* thirteenth century) prays: 'May the breast that was laid to His lips be

² Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976), 193. The *Virgo Lactans* image was heavily influenced by the image of the Egyptian Goddess, Isis, nursing her son, Horus, in her lap.

³ John Bradley, 'The Ballyhale Madonna and its iconography' in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past: studies on figurative art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dublin, 1987), 264.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 264. This image became an important statement after the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) rejected the Nestorian heresy, which denied that Mary could be the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) but was instead only Mother of Christ, the man (*Christotokos*). The Christ-child points to Mary, emphasising her motherhood of His two natures.

⁶ Bradley, 'The Ballyhale Madonna', 263, 267-73; Clodagh Tait, 'Harnessing corpses: death, burial, disinterment and commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1655' (Ph.D. thesis, University College Cork, 1999), 241. (I wish to thank Dr Tait for making sections of her work available to me before it was formally submitted.)

between me and fierce-hosted hell'.⁷ The Franciscan friar-poet, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.*1487), relates how, 'turned aside from exacting justice, the Son in her arms drank at her bosom, white milky bosom by which was dissolved His wrath'.⁸ Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (*d.*1448) adds that 'the breast whereon the Virgin nourished God's son – wondrous peace-making! – the result of its milk drunk by the child was that His wrath turned to gentleness'.⁹

The association of the Virgin Mary's milk with her motherly intercession was widely accepted in late medieval Europe as a whole. The example of Blessed Paula of Florence illustrates this idea. An anchorite (*c.*1368), she was given the gift of the Virgin's milk in a vision, which signified her intercession on behalf of mankind.¹⁰ From the thirteenth century onwards, phials reportedly containing the Virgin's milk were venerated across Europe, in shrines such as Walsingham, Chartres, Genoa, Padua, Rome, Venice, Avignon, Paris and Naples.¹¹ The Virgin's milk, therefore, became a powerful symbol of her mercy.¹² The Dominicans, for very different reasons, were instrumental in propagating the cult of the *Virgo Lactans*. As the Order was, at first, vehemently opposed to the notion of the Immaculate Conception, which was broadly supported by the Franciscans under the influence of Duns Scotus (*d.*1308), they claimed that 'if Mary had a physiology wholly uncorrupted by the consequences of sin then her body would have been incapable of nourishing the Christ child in the womb, and of providing milk for the new-born infant'.¹³ As the idea of Mary's Immaculate Conception

⁷ Lambert McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim Dána* (Dublin, 1939-40), 49 v.36.

⁸ Idem., *Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn* (Dublin, 1931), 2, v.4.

⁹ Idem., *Dán Dé* (Dublin, 1922), 17, v.29. The consoling effect of being suckled at the breast appears in Isaiah 66:10 ff where Jerusalem is portrayed as a mother, now free, who consoles her mournful children: 'Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may suck and be satisfied with her consoling breasts, that you may drink deeply with delight from the abundance of her glory'.

¹⁰ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, 199.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹² The role of Mary as *interventrix* and *mediatrix* between God and humanity became very important from the twelfth century. The elevated position accorded her, especially in the writings of the influential Cistercian order, may have influenced similar developments in Jewish mysticism seen in the late twelfth-century kabbalistic work, the *Bahir*, which appeared in Provence and introduced a divine female potency to the image of God. For a discussion of the relationship between twelfth-century Christian Mariology and the Jewish Kabbalah see Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His beauty: feminine images of God from the Bible to the early Kabbalah* (Princeton, 2002).

¹³ J. A. Tasioulas, 'The portrayal of Mary in the N-town plays' in Diane Watt (ed.), *Medieval women in their communities* (Cardiff, 1997), 227.

gained prominence, particularly in the fifteenth century, the image of the *Virgo Lactans* declined. If Mary was free from sin, then perhaps she did not lactate, it was thought.¹⁴

The familiar idea of Mary meriting Christ's attention, whereby God was somehow under an obligation to her, is also linked to her suckling of Christ. The Virgin was thought to have a right to have her children (humanity) saved owing to the merits of her life. As early as the thirteenth century, this idea is found in the poetry of the Gaelic Irish poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh: 'May my sister's Son bring me safely to death ... owing to the breasts whence He drank of thy substance.'¹⁵ Two centuries later, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn reminds Mary that 'owing to the breast thou gavest Jesus; thou hast the right to save me from Him.'¹⁶ He adds, elsewhere, 'If Heaven's Lord be not satisfied with thy request, woe to him who has caused thy breast to have been drunk in vain!'¹⁷ An unidentified poet¹⁸ relates how Mary urged her Son not to reject her child on account of His drinking at her breast and the nine months in which she cared for him in her womb.¹⁹ It is possible that the mother who breast-fed her child was perceived as transferring something of her own nature to the child. Perhaps this also accounts for the calming effect of the milk on Christ. This idea is not without foundation.²⁰ Tuathal Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1450) sees Mary as different in temperament from her Son: 'I ask Christ's mother to calm His anger; though the Lord is become one of us, Mary is gentler than her Son.'²¹ Suckling Mary's breast was thought somehow to activate a merciful side to Christ, a side that He inherited from His earthly mother. His justice was thus cheated of its usual domination of His character: 'Thy rest on Mary's breast revealed Thy mercy; Thy anger disliked Thy drinking at her merciful bosom'.²² The author of the *Vita Bernardi*, William of St Thierry (*d.* 1148), hinted at this idea when, encouraging women to breast-feed their own children, he gave the example of Bernard of Clairvaux's mother breast-feeding

¹⁴ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, 204.

¹⁵ McKenna, *Dán Dé*, 25, v.44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, v.17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15, v.7.

¹⁸ This poet could not have composed any later than 1513-14 when the poem appears in manuscript.

¹⁹ McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim dána*, 100, v.34.

²⁰ Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn supplies evidence which suggests the existence of such an idea in his allusion to the tradition that Mary nursed John the Baptist for a time and that he was preserved from sin: 'The nursing she gave him made him advance (in virtue); no fault was in him after she warmed him on her breast' (see McKenna (ed.), *Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn*, 27, v.7).

²¹ McKenna, *Dán Dé*, 19, v.19.

²² McKenna, *Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn*, 17, v.24.

all seven of his family: 'The noble lady disdained to commit them to another's breasts, but infused into them something of her own goodness with this mother's milk.'²³

II. DESPERATE MEASURES

When a gentle reminder of her having suckled Christ proved inadequate, the Virgin was obliged to resort to more extreme measures. This gave rise to the common depiction from the thirteenth century onwards of Mary baring her breast to her Son, vividly exhibiting a sign of His former dependence on her. Interestingly, the image of a mother exposing herself to her Son in order to persuade him to accede to a request, which was applied to the Virgin Mary in the later middle ages, is not of Christian origin. By that time, however, it had come to be Christianised. The Benedictine abbot, Arnold of Bonneval (*d.* after 1156), while discussing the mediatory roles of both Mary and Christ, she before the Son and He before the Father, during the course of a sermon, went on to illustrate this mediation by using an image of Christ, bare-chested, displaying His wounds to His Father and Mary, in her turn, uncovering her breast before Christ.²⁴ Thereafter, the image passed into popular use, and was increasingly applied to the Virgin imploring her Son for mercy.

One does not have to go far to discover the pre-Christian origins of the motif. However, the problem of the nature of its transmission into Western religious art and literature of the late medieval period remains. The scene Arnold described closely resembles the action of Hecuba, mother of Hector, in the *Iliad* on the occasion when she bore her breast to him, pleading with him not to fight Achilles, because Hector would surely lose his life. Similarly, the image is found in the

²³ Quoted in Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, 197. Warner here mistakenly attributes the quotation to Bernard himself. The exact reference can be found in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus a J. P. Migne editus et parisiis anno domini 1844 excursus: series Latina* (reprint, Paris, 1974), 185, col.227C. I am grateful to Wim Verbaal for bringing this misattribution to my attention.

²⁴ '*Securum accessum iam habet homo ad Deum, ubi mediatorem causae suae Filium habet ante Patrem, et ante Filium matrem. Christus, nudato latere, Patri ostendit latus et vulnera: Maria Christo pectus et ubera ...*' ('Man now has a secure access to God, where he has the Son as Mediator of his cause before the Father, and before the Son the mother. Christ, His side being laid bare, showed to the Father His side and His wounds: Mary [showed] to Christ her breast and her paps'): *De Laudibus Beatae Mariae Virginis* in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, 189, p.1726. There are some indications that Arnold may have passed over to the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux after retiring as Benedictine abbot. For further reading on Arnold of Bonneval see Guy-Marie Oury, 'Recherches sur Ernaud, abbé de Bonneval, historien de Saint Bernard', *Révue Mabillon*, 267 (1977); also Richard Upsher Smith, 'The Eucharistic meditations of Arnold of Bonneval: a reassessment', *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 61 (1994).

heroic tales of Gaelic Ireland. In the Ossianic tale ‘The Chase of Sid na mBann Finn’, when Fer-Lí, the son of Fer-tái wished to kill Finn, the following incident is related:

’Tis then Iuchna Ardmhór, daughter of Goll, son of Morna ... came to the hostel, tore her checkered coif from her head, loosed her fair, yellow hair, bared her breasts and said: ‘My son’, said she, ‘it is ruin of honour and disgrace to a soldier and a reproach to tell and dispelling of luck to betray the princely Finn of the Fiana; and now quickly leave the hostel, my son’, said she. And Fer-Lí left the hostel to his mother.²⁵

Another incident of breast-baring appears in the Ulster Cycle. However, it does not quite mirror the actions of either Hecuba or Iuchna Ardmhór. In the tale, Cú Chulainn is reported to have reached Emain Macha, having killed the sons of Nechta Scéne. The watchman fears that the warrior will execute mass slaughter and recommends the sending out of naked women to meet him. In desperation, King Conchobar heeds the recommendation and sends out the women, who bare their breasts to him, causing him to become distracted and to hide his face, whereupon he is overcome.²⁶ Since the breast-bearers are not known to Cú Chulainn and do not have any concern for him, the principal objective seems to be a tactical distraction rather than a heart-felt appeal.

The writings of Tacitus come closer to the kind of appeal made by Hecuba and Iuchna Ardmhór, in describing similar behaviour. In his *Germania*, the writer famously recounts how faltering armies were rallied by women who pleaded with their men and exposed their breasts in order to impress upon them the harsh reality of the certain enslavement that would follow defeat. The difference, in this case, seems to be that the women expose their breasts to encourage and not avoid warfare. However, this ‘encouragement’ to fight arises from a concern for the whole of their society, including the long-term well being of their female population.²⁷ In examining the previous example from the Ulster Cycle, Raymond J.

²⁵ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Royal Irish Academy Todd lecture series xvi: Fianaigecht* (Dublin, 1910), 73. The story is taken from British Library Egerton Ms.1782, f.20b 1. This manuscript (c.1517) was written by scribes of the family of Ó Maoilchonaire in Cluain Plocáin, Co. Roscommon, for Art Buidhe Mac Murchada Caomhánach (Robin Flower, *British Museum Catalogue of Irish MSS*, ii, 262).

²⁶ This incident appears in Recension I of *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, II, 802 ff, near the end of Episode III (*Macgnímrada*, ‘Boyhood Deeds’): See Raymond J. Cormier, ‘Pagan shame or Christian modesty’, *Celtica*, 14 (1981).

²⁷ I am grateful to Phyllis Jestice for this reference (See also the discussion of this motif at <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/medieval-religion/2000-05.html>).

Cormier poses the question of whether Cú Chulainn's reaction hints at Christian influence, which portrays him as ashamed at beholding nakedness on account of his saintly modesty, or some other non-Christian, classical influence. He cites W.B. Stanford's assertion that the Cú Chulainn episode finds an analogue in Plutarch's *Moralia* 248B (IX. The Lycian Women) in which the character Bellerophon accedes to the Lycian women in four successive versions, calming his anger.²⁸ The example of the calming influence of the Lycian women on Bellerophon has, interestingly, many parallels with the Virgin Mary's intercession before Christ. The pattern of each version in the *Moralia* is the same: (1) Bellerophon performs an act of liberation; (2) He receives no thanks; (3) He becomes enraged; (4) He encounters the women, who request him to cease his anger; (5) His anger abates. The portrayal of Mary prevailing upon her Son to cease His anger, as understood in the late medieval period, follows an identical pattern: (1) The act of liberation that Christ performs is His death on the cross, which redeems humanity; (2) Humanity is, for the most part, indifferent and ungrateful; (3) Christ's rage arises from the wounds He suffered on Calvary and mankind's subsequent apathy; (4) He encounters the Woman (Mary) who requests him to cease His anger; (5) His anger abates.

The evidence of classical influence upon this motif is quite strong. The action of Hecuba in the *Iliad*, when she pleads with her son Hector not to fight Achilles, has been described as an attempt to evoke in him the sentiment of *eleos* (pity).²⁹ The suggestion that the exposed breast gives a glimpse of how Hecuba would react should Hector be slain, can be compared with how the lamenting handmaidens at the death of Dido are depicted in an early fifth-century manuscript of Virgil's work.³⁰ A tenth-century manuscript illumination of the Massacre of the Innocents shows grieving mothers react-

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See Kevin Crotty, *The poetics of supplication: Homer's Iliad and Odyssey* (New York, 1994), 74: 'The memory that Hecuba seeks to provoke in her son bears the same features as the mourner's memory. She asks Hector to "remember", essentially, how he will be mourned should he die: her exposed breast suggests the vehemence of the bereaved mother's grief. Hector will be stirred to feel *eleos* if he bears in mind not only the way Hecuba nursed him as a baby but how she will be unable to bury him properly if he dies at Achilles' hands. This memory is less a recollection of the past than a lively sense of the intimate and inextricable ties between them'.

³⁰ 'Death of Dido' from Virgil, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Lat. 3223. My thanks to Jim Bugslag for drawing my attention to this reference. For recent work on this see David Wright, *The Roman Vergil and the origins of medieval book design* (Toronto, 2001).

ing similarly.³¹ However, it does not make sense to explain the pleading of the Virgin Mary in exactly the same way as that of Hecuba if the above interpretation is correct. Mary does not expose her breast to God out of any fear of Him being killed in battle. If this were the case, one would have expected her to be depicted performing the gesture before her Son went to Calvary to be crucified. Likewise, yet another appearance of this motif, namely that found in Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*, does not fit Mary's role perfectly either; Clytemnestra draws attention to her breast before her son, Orestes, in a vain attempt to convince him to have mercy on her.³² Unlike Clytemnestra, Mary, does not plead for mercy for herself. However, these instances are useful in that they attest to the fact that the motif certainly had claim to a fairly significant background in secular pagan literature from a very early period, predating Christianity. This should make it less than surprising that the motif was eventually adopted for use in the realm of the sacred. Indeed, its occurrence in the religious literature and iconography of Europe from the twelfth-century onwards is quite frequent. However, despite the parallels found in the *Iliad* and other classical works, one cannot argue for a direct transmission of the motif from Greek classical literature to Western Christianity in the thirteenth century given the fact that Homer and the tragicians were completely unknown to the Western Middle Ages. One Latin author who was known in the twelfth century was Valerius Maximus. In his *Memorable deeds and sayings* Valerius speaks of Coriolanus and how he was mollified in his intent to attack Rome by his mother and the persuasive power, not of her breast, but of her womb.³³

The role of Mary in the late medieval period is clearly that of Advocate who pleads for mercy on behalf of humanity. Alfonso 'el Sabio' X (1221-84), royal patron of Castile, in his *Cantigas de Santa Maria* refers to this action of Mary:

³¹ Codex Egberti, Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 24. The Massacre of the Innocents occurs on f. 15v. An illustration of it can be found in Carl Nordenfalk, *Early medieval book illumination*, (New York, 1988), 119. My thanks to Jim Bugslag for this reference.

³² 'Stay child, and fear to strike. O Son, this breast pillowed thine head full oft, while, drowsed with sleep thy toothless mouth drew mother's milk from me'. Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*, Part 13, Classical Literature Online Library, <http://www.greece.com/library/Aeschylus.html> (accessed 19 February 2004). I am grateful to Scott McLetchie for drawing my attention to this instance of the motif.

³³ D. R. Shackleton Bailey (ed. and trans.), *Valerius Maximus: Memorable deeds and sayings* (Harvard, 2000), Book V, part 4, paragraph 1. My thanks to Wim Verbaal for this reference.

'E en aquel dia, qund' ele for mais airado ... móstra-ll'as tetas santas que ouv' el mamado' ('and on that day, when He will be more angry ... show him your holy nipples He had sucked').³⁴

Iconography, matching the above verse, usually occurs in Judgement scenes where Mary, with her bare breast, petitions the formidable figure of Christ who is usually sitting on a rainbow, His open wounds condemning the world and its sin.³⁵ Ana Domínguez Rodríguez sees the illustration of the final judgement scene in two miniatures found in the 'Codice Rico' collection of the *cantigas* (Biblioteca de l'Escorial, Madrid, t.I.1.) as marking an important change in the portrayal of the intercession of the Virgin. She notes Mary's abandonment of her exercise of simple intercessory prayer for this far more proactive and dramatic approach, as illustrated in the miniatures of two of the *cantigas* (50 and 80), as exceptional for the thirteenth century, highlighting the importance of their role in the diffusion of this image, which was to become ever more popular in the two succeeding centuries.³⁶ The Virgin's role in this instance was primarily to calm Christ's anger by reminding Him of the nursing she once provided him with. Often, John the Baptist accompanies Mary in her intercession. This is the case in a Welsh depiction of the Doom that appears over the chancel arch at Wrexham.³⁷ John the Baptist also appears with Mary in the same manner in wall paintings, dated 1425-1550, that are to be found in fourteen village churches in Denmark.³⁸

³⁴ *Cantiga* 422. See Alfonso X, el Sabio. *Cantigas de Santa María* (ed.), Walter Mettmann (3 vols, Madrid, 1986). I am grateful to Carlos Sastre for this reference and also to Anthony Lappin who discussed this verse with me, placing it in its context; he also read and commented on an earlier version of this article. A second reference to breast-baring appears in *cantiga* 360.

³⁵ Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England c.1400-1580* (New Haven, 1992), 157. For a comprehensive account of the dual action of Christ's wounds, namely accusative and salvific, see Salvador Ryan, 'Reign of blood: devotion to the wounds of Christ in late medieval Gaelic Ireland' in Joost Augusteyn and Mary Ann Lyons (eds.), *Irish history: a research yearbook* (Dublin, 2002).

³⁶ Ana Domínguez Rodríguez, "'Compassio" y "Coredeemptio" en las Cantigas de Santa María. Crucifixión y Juicio Final', *Archivo Español de Arte*, 281 (1998), 27, 29. My thanks to Carlos Sastre who brought this article to my attention.

³⁷ I am grateful to Madeleine Gray for this reference. For a discussion of Welsh depictions of the interceding Virgin see Madeleine Gray and Salvador Ryan, "'Mother of Mercy": the Virgin Mary and the Last Judgement in Welsh and Irish tradition' in Karen Jankulak, Thomas O' Loughlin and Jonathan Wooding (eds), *Ireland and Wales in the middle ages* (forthcoming). For a discussion of universal salvation through Mary and John see Thomas D. Hill, 'Delivering the damned in Old English anonymous homilies and Jon Arason's "Ljomur"', *Medium Aevum*, 60 (1992). My thanks to Anthony Lappin for this reference.

³⁸ I wish to express my gratitude to James Mills for providing me with the above information. For a detailed survey of Danish wall paintings see Knud Banning (ed.), *A catalogue of wall paintings in the churches of medieval Denmark, 1100-1600* (4 vols, Copenhagen, 1976-82).

The growth in popularity of this image in succeeding centuries was due in no small part to its prominence in various manuscript copies of the hugely popular fourteenth-century *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, and it is represented right up to the seventeenth century in miniatures and panel paintings.³⁹ It is in the *Speculum* that the related image of the *double intercession* of both Christ and Mary interceding before the Father first emerges, which casts another light on the significance of the Virgin's breast baring.

In chapter thirty-nine of the *Speculum* a scene is introduced in which Christ, in an attempt to offset the anger of His Father, shows Him the wounds He bore for the sake of humanity. The author, meanwhile, includes an interesting reference to Roman history, alluding to an individual who prefigured Christ in his use of this gesture. The figure is Antipater, a defeated general who goes before Caesar showing him the wounds that he received while fighting in battle in an effort to convince the emperor to have pity on him and pardon his obvious bungling of military affairs.⁴⁰ Similarly, Mary's intercessory role is shown in the *Speculum* to be prefigured, this time in Scripture, by the pleading of Esther, who goes before Ahasuerus on behalf of her people.⁴¹ In the most complete manuscripts of the *Speculum* four miniatures appear in chapter thirty-nine – two show Christ and Mary before the Father in their intercessory roles, He showing the wound in His side, she her breast. The third and fourth miniatures present the events in history that prefigured this action, showing the Antipater and Esther scenes respectively.⁴² The text accompanying the images synopsis the subject matter of the preceding chapter and highlights what the new chapter hopes to teach:

In praecedentibus capitulis audivimus quomodo Maria est nostra Mediatrix et quomodo in omnibus angustiis est nostra defensatrix; consequenter audiamus quomodo Christus ostendit Patri suo pro nobis sua vulnera et Maria ostendit Filio suo pectus et ubera ('In the previous chapters we heard how Mary is our Mediatrix and how she, in all her trouble, is our defender; consequently, let us hear how

³⁹ Rodríguez, "Compassio" y "Coredemptio", 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴¹ Rosemary Woolf, *The English religious lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), 35.

⁴² Rodríguez, "Compassio" y "Coredemptio", 29. The Esther scene is also depicted on what remains of an altarpiece of Konrad Witz: see Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art: ii: the Passion of Jesus Christ* (trans. Janet Seligman) (London, 1972), 225.

Christ showed His wounds to His Father for us and [how] Mary showed her breast and teats').⁴³

In French miracle plays and Italian *laude*, Jesus is depicted as displaying His wounds to the Father (which are understood to merit the Father's attention) as He pleads on behalf of humanity, while Mary bares her breast (which, in the same way, merits His ear). She states '*Doulz chier filz, vez ey la mamelle don't je te norry bonnement*' ('Dear sweet son, regard here the breast with which I nursed you generously').⁴⁴ In an anonymous text, probably dating to sixteenth-century Spain, Mary pleads with her Son on behalf of sinners using the following words: '*Por la leche que mamaste hijo de mi casto pecho por el vientre en que encarnaste, por la Pasión que pasaste por nuestro bien y provecho ...*' ('By the milk which you sucked, Son of my chaste breast, by the womb in which you took flesh, by the Passion which you suffered for our good and benefit ...').⁴⁵ This image is also to be found widely across Europe as in Konrad Witz's panel, 'Man of Sorrows and Mary intercede with God the Father' (c. 1450).⁴⁶ In a similar painting by Hans Holbein the Elder (c. 1508), the inscription above Christ reads 'Father, see my red wounds; help men in their need, through my bitter death', and above Mary: 'Lord sheath Thy sword that Thou hast drawn, and see my breast where the Son has suckled.'⁴⁷

The above scene was much used in *Horae* (Books of Hours), particularly in the fifteenth century. Ana Rodríguez lists a number of these, including an unusual illustration in a Spanish Book of Hours which depicts Mary kneeling before the cross showing her bare breast to her Son while Christ looks down at her and, with His right hand freed from the nail, points to the wound in His side. God the Father watches the scene from above.⁴⁸ In the famous 'Hours of Catherine of Cleves' (A.D. 1435), a similar scene is portrayed. Christ

⁴³ Paul Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Miséricorde: étude d'un theme iconographique* (Paris, 1908), 246. The link between both chapters (i.e. the link between Mary's role as Mediatrix and her proactive advocacy at Judgement) and the origins of this idea are discussed below

⁴⁴ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, 199.

⁴⁵ Rodríguez, "'Compassio' y 'Coredemptio'", 30.

⁴⁶ Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel; see Caroline Walker Bynum (ed.), *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York, 1991), 113.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The 'Triptych of Antonius Tsgrooten' (1507) of Van der Weyden (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp) also depicts this image.

⁴⁸ Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, Ms.Res.191 (f. 145 v). See Rodríguez, "'Compassio' y 'Coredemptio'", 30.

is on the cross and Mary is kneeling before it, baring her breast to her Son. However, in this case, Christ does not look down at His mother but instead looks up in an expression of deep pain at God the Father who views the scene at a distance. On the phylactery above Mary is written '*Propter ubera quae te lactaverunt sis sibi propitius*' ('On account of the teats that suckled you, be gracious to her').⁴⁹ It is also to be found in the 'Hours of Turin' of Jan Van Eyck.⁵⁰

Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that the association made between Christ's wounds and Mary's breast should not be read as simply an illustration of her compassion (sharing in Christ's Passion) the extolling of which was dear to Arnold of Bonneval. Instead, she argues that the *double intercession* is a comparison between two feedings. Alluding to a medieval physiological notion that breast milk was actually a form of blood, as a result of which all human exudations were considered at the time as 'bleedings', Mary is seen to have shed her 'blood' just as Christ did. Conversely, the image of Christ breast-feeding humanity with the blood from His side-wound was not unfamiliar in medieval spirituality.⁵¹ A twelfth or early thirteenth-century reference, mistakenly attributed to St Augustine by a certain Hiepius who is quoted by Johannes Pinus in the *Acta Bernardi*, alleges that placed between Christ's side wound and Mary's breast, the saint cannot decide from where he should receive nourishment.⁵²

III. JOURNEY TO THE FRINGE OF EUROPE: GAELIC EXAMPLES

It is hardly surprising that with such a prolific presence elsewhere in Europe, this motif should eventually reach the shores of late medieval Ireland. The influence of continental devotion on popular religious ideas in Ireland is only beginning to be satisfactorily

⁴⁹ *La Miniature Hollondaise: Le Grand Siècle de l'enumération dans les Pays-Bas Septentrionaux* (Brussels, n.d.), 41.

⁵⁰ Rodríguez, "'Compassio' y 'Coredeemptio'", 31.

⁵¹ See Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, for a more comprehensive discussion of this image.

⁵² '*Hinc pascor a vulnere; hinc lator ab ubere. Positus in medio quo me vertens nescio*' ('From the one, I am fed from the wound; from the other I draw milk from the breast. Placed in the middle, turning myself whither I know not'): J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* 185, 878. I am grateful to Rev. Rohann G. Roten for drawing my attention to this passage. The interchangeability of milk and blood feedings (milk being identified in the medieval period as processed blood) can be seen in an anonymous sixteenth-century painting of the entombment of Christ in which he is depicted holding what unmistakably appear as female breasts as if about to lactate. *Entombment*, anonymous; 16th century; provenance: Lessines, Musée de l'Hôpital Notre Dame à la Rose, Chambre de Monseigneur, Inv.Nr. TA 0067, oil on wood. I am very grateful to Wim Verbaal for this reference.

acknowledged.⁵³ From the extant evidence, occurring in the religious verses of the bardic poets, it appears initially that specific allusion to Mary's breast-baring first achieved recognition in sixteenth-century Ireland although the fifteenth-century Franciscan poet, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (*d.* 1487), depicts his patron saint as performing the same gesture, displaying his breast-wound to Christ and pleading for forgiveness of the poet's sins.⁵⁴ However, one particular reference to the motif (and arguably the most explicit example) cannot be accurately dated. This particular reference is discussed below. Of the allusions that can be dated to the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, four poets in all make reference to Mary interceding in this way. Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh (*d.* 1556) stated that 'no words of His mother could clear off the charge against me; she must coaxingly show her breast to her Son that thus His wrath may abate.'⁵⁵ Muirchertach Ó Cionga (*fl.* 1560) also believed that 'her breast, with its unquenchable flame (of love) satisfies the wrath of her Son.'⁵⁶ Flann Mac Conmidhe (*fl.* 1612), addressing Christ, testified to the power of Mary's breast: 'When Thy anger rises, let it be stayed (by the sight of) that breast (of Mary), white and gleaming and able to save all men from Thy rising wrath.'⁵⁷ The late sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, petitioned the Virgin to 'show thy bosom to the lamb of thy breast ...' but he was in no doubt about where Mary's true power lay. As seen above, Mary did not persuade by powerful sexual gestures as do the women in classical literature, but, instead by her Christian attributes; Aonghus is, thus, quick to follow with 'Remind him of the glory of thy virginity; ... by (the memory of) his drinking the milk of thy breast, by thy humility and thy entreaties, set thy dear nursling at peace with me.'⁵⁸ Mary's breasts, therefore, are symbolic of her nursing of Christ and, by extension, of her compliance with His will, declared in her *Fiat*, at the Annunciation. They serve to signify that Mary merits the attention of God, and that she has a right to use this merit to plead for mercy on behalf of humanity.

Arnold of Bonneval, in the twelfth century, linked the advocacy of Christ before the Father with Mary's advocacy before Christ, considering the glory of the Son and Mother indivisible: 'Both divide the

⁵³ See Salvador Ryan, 'Popular religion in Gaelic Ireland, 1445-1645' (Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2002).

⁵⁴ McKenna (ed.), *Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn*, 1, v.25.

⁵⁵ Idem, (ed.), *Aithdiogluim dána*, 68, v.4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 60, v.10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 85, v.11.

⁵⁸ Lambert Mc Kenna (ed.), *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh* (Dublin, 1919), 19, vv 11-13.

offices of mercy between them, Christ showing the Father His wounds, Mary her breast.’⁵⁹ This link eventually found its way into iconography. A Florentine painting (c.1402), formerly in the cathedral in Florence, depicts Christ and Mary kneeling before the Father, pleading for mercy, He displaying His wounds, she her breast. The inscription reads ‘Dearest son, because of the milk I gave you, have mercy on them’.⁶⁰

The final undated allusion to this gesture by a bardic poet is perhaps the most intriguing and, equally, the most frustrating for the historian. In a poem entitled *Is farsaing dealbtha pobul De*, attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, which discusses, among other things, the Day of Judgement and the geography of the world, the poet notes:

Then Mary will speak aloud: she will be heard everywhere; she will fall on her knees and make obeisance to the High-King.

“Here am I, thine own mother, save my friends from Thy wrath. These are the breasts Thou drankst as a drink, O King of Heaven in Thy infancy.

These are the hands which were about Thy person, this the body in which Thou wert, this is the heart in which Thou foundest unchanging love.

Those are the eyes that shed drops of blood, those are the palms which were smitten, this is the face which was insulted for the enjoyment of the demoniacal host ...”⁶¹

By placing Mary on her knees before the High King before she adverts to her breasts, the poet follows closely iconographic depictions of the *double intercession*. It would be quite easy to claim that this poem too is a sixteenth-century work, in line with the other examples cited. However, an earlier allusion cautions against such a

⁵⁹ Hilda Graef, *Mary: a history of doctrine and devotion*, i, (London, 1963), 243. The practice of the intercessor asking that the person before whom the pleading is done *remember* (my emphasis) a deed done in the past and thereby act on its account, could work in two directions. A seventeenth-century ‘Treatise concerning the pietie and devotion we ought to beare towards Our Blessed Lady the mother of God’ recounts how St Gertrude asked if Christ would intercede for her before the Virgin to whom she reckoned she had given little attention up to that point. Christ’s appeal appears to follow a remarkably similar pattern to the many that the Virgin makes before Him in medieval literature: “Remember my most loving mother, how for thy sake I have beene most mercifull unto sinners, and behould this, my chosen servant, wth that affection, as if she had loved and served ^{the} wth all respect and devotion all the dayes of her life” at w^{ch} words the Blessed Virgin, as it were, wholie melted and resolved into a mellifluous sweetnes, did bestow her selfe wth all her beatitude for the love of her sonne upon her’: British Library Lansdowne MS 376, chapter 10, ff 12-13.

⁶⁰ Warner, *Alone of all her sex*, 200.

⁶¹ Tomás Ó Máille, ‘A poem by Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh’, *Archivium Hibernicum*, 2 (1913), vv 39-42.

hasty dating. In referring to the world in verse 10, the poet states that it 'consists of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia: this is land to be occupied by the beautiful descendants of Adam', suggesting that the poem must have been composed at the very latest around the turn of the sixteenth century and, possibly, much earlier still.⁶² However, the history of the motif itself, as discussed above, renders it most unlikely that the poem was, in fact, composed by the thirteenth-century Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh. Since a reference to the motif already exists from the fifteenth century in Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn's allusion to the performance of the gesture by St Francis, it is possible that the poem *Is farsaing dealbtha pobul De* is also a fifteenth-century work. In any case, it remains the earliest reference that we know of to Mary's breast-baring in bardic verse.

IV. TRANSMISSION OF THE MOTIF TO IRELAND

Having discussed above the classical origins of this religious motif and its subsequent adoption from the secular to the religious worlds in Europe (the details of which have yet to be explored) a final question begs itself: from what source was this motif, so popular in Europe, eventually transmitted to Gaelic Ireland, where it was alluded to by at least four bardic poets. Did the secular version of this motif, to be found in both *Fiannaíocht* and *Rúraíocht* tales reach Ireland before its religious counterpart, and what exactly was the relationship between the two? How did an obscure reference in a sermon by a relatively little known Benedictine eventually impact itself so heavily on literary and iconographic expressions of devotion in late medieval Europe? These questions have no simple answers. Yet there are certain clues that may afford us some insight into the process. Rosemary Woolf, making reference to the appearance of this motif in a poem found in John of Grimestone's preaching book (which invites man to consider the *double intercession*), suggests its direct source of influence to be *Le Triple Exercice* of Stephen, the early thirteenth-century abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Sawley in Yorkshire.⁶³ *Queen Mary's Psalter*, in its representation of the Last Judgement, also contains this image. It is not hard to imagine that this motif, originating in twelfth-century Cistercian France, most probably travelling to England courtesy of Cistercian links (as evidenced by Stephen of Sawley's reference to it), might eventually

⁶² *Ibid.*, v.10.

⁶³ Man is invited to consider that 'þe moder þe sone sewt hire breste, þe sone his fader his blodi side and alle his wondis depe an wyde' (Woolf, *The English religious lyric*, 34).

arrive *via* the same order to Ireland. The artistic and literary standing it eventually attained may well be attributed, not to Arnold of Bonneval, but, by default, to Bernard of Clairvaux, for the passage mentioning the maternal gesture of Mary was repeatedly referred to as the work of the more famous member of the order. Stephen of Sawley made the mistake in his *Triple Exercise*.⁶⁴ The *Speculum Beatae Mariae Virginis*, a collection of texts borrowed from Bernard, contained Arnold's passage, attributing it to Bernard. Moreover, the Louvain theologian, Molanus, defending the image against reformist criticism in the mid-sixteenth century, quotes the lines in his work *De historia sacrarum imaginum*, again without the proper attribution. Perhaps the misattribution worked to the advantage of the survival and influence of the passage itself. Being Bernardian in tone, rooted in Bernard's famous *De Aqueductu* sermon in which he spoke of Mary as the canal through which the graces of God flow to us, the original passage of Arnold of Bonneval strengthened Mary's role as Mediatrix and introduced the *Scala Salutis* theme which had Mary intercede with her Son and, in turn, her Son with the Father, eventually giving rise to its expression in the *double intercession* theme. The respect with which the writings of Bernard were held in late medieval Europe was very high and if an idea supposedly came from Bernard it was sure to get publicity.

CONCLUSION

There are many lessons to be learned from the above examination of the motif of the breast-baring Mother of God. This particular depiction of Mary's advocacy has a fascinating background, rooted in both the secular and religious art and literature of the European continent. Its adoption by the Gaelic Irish (as evidenced by the poets), at least as early as the sixteenth century, illustrates once more that Gaelic Irish devotion was heavily reliant on European models and that continental models themselves were, in turn, dependent on antecedent secular imagery, which was highly evocative and which succeeded in appealing to the imagination of many. Secular and religious imagery, then, were seldom to be found far away from each other. Just how the process of cross-fertilisation worked in practice, however, remains to be properly researched. Where better to start than the mystery of what exactly inspired a Benedictine monk named Arnold of Bonneval to describe the Blessed Virgin Mary in such outrageous terms in the course of the twelfth century?

⁶⁴ A. Wilmart, 'Le triple exercice d'Etienne de Sallai', *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 11 (1930), 360.