

“Hag of the Castle:” Women, Family, and Community in Later Medieval Ireland

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In a letter written as part of his work for the Irish Department of the Ordnance Survey in 1840, Thomas O’Conor recorded his reaction to a “Sheelana-gig” sculpture—the image of a naked woman shown exposing her genitalia (fig. 1)—that he saw on the old church at Kiltinane, Co. Tipperary.¹ He wrote, in part: “The probability is that the figure was never intended to be placed in this building and that it belongs to one of a different sort, say a castle, the stone which bears it having been removed from its proper place and laid in its present situation by someone who delighted in inconsistencies.”² He continued with “it would much more creditable if Sheela ni Ghig (the figure so-called) could be proved to be of pagan origin, for as such there would be every excuse for its existence. But it is much to be feared that no such thing is possible. And it is highly discreditable to a Christian congregation to have had before their eyes a representation of the kind.”³



1. Sheela-na-gig from the Fethard wall in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, Ireland, detail, twelfth-century
(Photo: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sheelanagigfethardwall.jpg>)

The work of the nineteenth-century Irish Ordnance Survey marked the coming of the Sheela sculptures into scholarly consciousness and so O’Conor’s remarks are among the earliest recorded reactions to such a sculpture.⁴ His comments foreshadow the direction taken by much of the modern scholarship

on these images. O’Conor’s words make clear his feeling that such a highly sexualized image had no place on a Christian church; nevertheless, Sheelas often appear on twelfth-century and later medieval churches in both England and Ireland. He is correct that these images cannot be explained by projecting them back into the pagan past, for the appearance of similar imagery on Romanesque churches in France and Spain makes clear that they originated as part of a vocabulary of architectural ornament that was introduced from the continent in the twelfth century.⁵ Scholarship has thus focused on finding a way to make the Sheelas fit into their Christian churchly surroundings and has come to see them as warnings against the evils of women and the sins of sexuality: I have critiqued this interpretation of the Sheela sculptures elsewhere.⁶ In this paper, I seek to shift the terms of discourse on the Irish Sheelas in particular by seizing upon a suggestion also present in O’Conor’s observations: that the Kiltinane sculpture might have originally been part of a castle and would be a better fit for such a building.

Tower-house castles—small, defended, domestic structures built in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries by elites of the Irish, gaelicized Anglo-Irish, and English communities in Ireland alike—form a second common architectural context for Irish Sheela-na-gigs (figs. 2-3).⁷ It is impossible to know if the Sheelas that appear in this context were reused from earlier churches, in a reversal of the movement that O’Conor imagines, or if they were newly made for these buildings.⁸ In either case, it is clear that in later medieval Ireland the tower-house castle was understood to be an appropriate

location for a Sheela sculpture. This location prompted an alternative local name for this type of sculpture, “Hag of the Castle,” which was recorded in an article published in 1894.⁹ Focusing on the castle as a context for the Irish Sheelas shifts the terms of discourse on these striking images away from issues of sexuality as defined by church teachings and towards issues of reproduction as shaped by the patriarchal social and familial orders. In medieval societies, the significance of women’s reproductive potential was shaped by laws and practices involving marriage and inheritance. In medieval Ireland, differences in these laws and practices placed women on the front lines in the clash of communities that developed beginning in the twelfth century. Women’s capacity to reproduce created openings in the boundaries of the family, *fine*, or community that could allow for land, power, and identity to drain away. In this social context, a Sheela sculpture on the wall of the defended domestic environment of a tower-house castle would have pictured the dangerous openness of the female body and so the threat presented to patriarchal society by women’s reproductive potential. Furthermore, I argue here that the sculpture would have turned that threat around to become part of the castle’s display of defensive power.



2. Ballinacarriga Castle, Co. Cork, Ireland, twelfth-century
(Photo: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ballinacarriga_Castle.jpg)



3. Sheele-na-gig on the east wall of Ballinacarriga Castle, detail, twelfth-century
(Photo: courtesy of the author)

I. The Native Irish Laws

Among the native Irish, marriage and inheritance were regulated by an extensive body of laws. The surviving texts of these laws have been dated to the seventh and eighth centuries on linguistic grounds, while the manuscripts in which they appear date to the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries.¹⁰ The proper temporal locus for the laws and their social relevance at any given time in medieval Irish history have thus been subjects for debate. Here I follow from the work of scholars who argue for the continuing relevance of the laws from the time of their composition to that of their transcription, which includes both the twelfth-century period of the introduction of Sheela sculptures into Ireland and the later medieval moment of the construction of tower-house castles.¹¹

In the law texts, information about marriage is found in two tracts contained in the compilation known as the *Senchas Mar*: the *Cain Lanamna* or “law of couples,” which is primarily about divorce, and an untitled tract known today as the “*Dire*-text,” as it is primarily about *dire* or honor-price.¹² The *Cain Lanamna* makes a distinction between multiple types of marriage unions and “*Dire*-text” between multiple marital statuses for women.¹³ The primary interest that scholars have found in this careful cataloging of multiple types of marriages and wives is that it makes reasonably clear that the native Irish laws allowed for polygamy: a man could apparently be joined in several marital unions, of different types, to several women, of different statuses, at the same time.¹⁴ Equally striking is the fact that the laws include as marriages relationships that,

in other times and places, would not be categorized as such. Based on these laws, native Irish society seems to have had an unusually extended definition of marriage. In particular, there are the so-called “visiting unions” in which the man and woman did not establish a joint household. Instead, the man visited the woman either at her family home or in another establishment.¹⁵ In glosses and commentaries on the laws, a woman in such a relationship is commonly referred to as an *adaltrach*, a term probably derived from “adulteress” and introduced by Christian writers to denigrate these unions and the women in them. In the law texts themselves, however, such unions are presented as lawful, recognized, and respectable — as marriages.¹⁶ They are distinguished from still other kinds of union between a man and a woman that are presented as irregular and unlawful.

Illicit and illegal relationships, as presented in the law texts, are those that take place in secret or “in the woods.” The primary problem with such relationships was that they had the potential to produce children of unknown paternity.¹⁷ Such children would have been outside of the normal social structure which was built around the *fine*; a patrimonial descent group made up of men who shared in the partible inheritance of patrimonial or *fintiu* lands and who provided social and legal support for one another.¹⁸ Women were marginal to the *fine*: they could not fully inherit *fintiu* land and they did not pass membership in the *fine* or rights to its lands along to their children.¹⁹ If a woman bore a child with no known father, she could take an oath or undergo an ordeal in order to establish paternity, and then the man’s *fine* might decide to accept the child as its own. But then again, they might not, and the woman’s father’s *fine* would be

faced with raising another man’s child.²⁰ If a boy, this child was known as a *nia*, the term for a sister’s son who had been rejected by his father’s *fine* and brought up by his mother’s kin.²¹ Without access to *fintiu* land from his father, he might look to inherit from within his mother’s *fine*, raising the danger that another man’s son might enter into his mother’s brothers’ rightful legacy.²²

According to Lisa Bitel, the inheritance of property was a main concern of the native Irish laws and the lawyers’ interest in marriage was largely in regulating the ways in which children became heirs to property — or did not, depending upon the relationship between their parents.²³ It was in order to establish paternity and thus the proper *fine* membership for children, and so the proper devolution of property, that the native laws recognized and regularized as marriage such a wide range of different relationships. In *fine*-based society, women’s reproductive potential had to be controlled through this extensive body of marriage legislation because that potential could produce a dangerous opening on the edges of the *fine* — a son rejected by his father’s *fine* and so without a *fine* of his own, to whom *fintiu* land from his mother’s kin might pass—despite the law— thus draining that land away from the paternal kin.²⁴

The native Irish may have seen the striking openness of the Sheelas’ bodies in terms of the potential opening in the boundaries of the *fine* produced by women’s reproductive capacity. The sculptures’ grotesque features, including staring eyes, prominent ears, open mouths, pendulous breasts, and exposed ribs, may have pictured the dangers that capacity presented for the men of the *fine*. This understanding of the sculptures may date back as far as their introduction

into Ireland in the twelfth-century for, at that same time, voices both internal and external to native society became critical of the native laws and the marriage practices they allowed. This meant that the regulation of women’s reproductive potential came to be at issue in Ireland. Furthermore, the voices of external critique were part of the rhetoric that surrounded the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, which was accompanied by a series of intermarriages between Anglo-Norman men and Irish women. These marriages opened Irish society to the invaders and allowed for the passage of land and power into their hands.

II. Reform and Invasion

The internal criticism of the native Irish laws, and specifically of marriage as regulated by these laws, came from a movement for church reform that was pursued through a series of synods. These meetings and their decrees addressed a wide variety of topics including the organization of the Irish church, the relationship between the clerical and lay components of Irish society, and issues surrounding marriage. The first of these synods, held at Cashel in Co. Tipperary in 1101, passed decrees against simony, lay interference in church property, clerical marriage, and marriages that violated the church’s prohibition on marriage within the seventh degree of consanguinity or affinity.²⁵

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, Cashel is not far from Kiltinane and a number of other Sheelas are located on churches and castles in this part of Tipperary.²⁶ A second reforming synod, held at Kells in Co. Meath in 1152, requested palls for a number of new archbishops and instructed laymen to put away their concubines

(additional wives held in less formal unions, such as the visiting union described above), and their kinswomen (women to whom they were married who fell within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity).²⁷ Endogamy, the marriage of close kin, appears as a cause of concern in both of these sets of decrees. In native Irish society such marriages were an important way of reaffirming group identity and reinforcing group possession of property by reintegrating women into the *fine* of their birth.²⁸ The repetition of these provisions most likely marks the failure of the reform movement to actually change peoples' behavior, which would have made marriage a site of tension in Irish society; it appears that reform-minded ecclesiastics repeatedly denounced the marriage practices of their lay neighbors, but to no avail.

In 1172, after the Anglo-Norman entry into Ireland, another reforming synod was held at Cashel. As recorded by Gerald of Wales in his “History of the Conquest of Ireland,” the decrees passed by this synod generally repeated those of the earlier meetings, including the demand that men repudiate women within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity and affinity and contract lawful marriages instead. The one new decree passed at this synod called for the Irish church to be brought into conformity with the practices of the church in England: this additional provision shows the transformation of the reform movement in Ireland into an instrument for the extension of Anglo-Norman power.²⁹ Anglo-Norman criticisms of Irish marriage laws and practices, and accompanying attacks on Ireland's independent status, date back to the eleventh century when the archbishops of Canterbury, Lanfranc and Anselm, wrote letters to various

Irish kings in an attempt to extend their jurisdiction to Ireland.³⁰ The first of Lanfranc’s letters of Irish matters was written to Guthric, “king of Ireland,” who was actually the king of the Norse enclave in Dublin. In it, Lanfranc writes,

There are said to be men in your kingdom who take wives from either their own kindred or that of their deceased wives; others who by their own will and authority abandon the wives who are legally married to them; some who give their own wives to others and by an abominable exchange receive the wives of other men instead.³¹

Lanfranc’s second letter on Irish issues was written to Toirrdelbach Ua Briain, king of Munster and high king of Ireland. Here he writes,

But among the many things that are commendable certain reports have reached us that are quite the opposite; namely that in your kingdom a man abandons at his own discretion and without any grounds in canon law the wife who is legally married to him, not hesitating to form a criminal alliance — by the law of marriage or rather by the law of fornication — with any other woman he pleases, either a relative of his own or of his deserted wife or a woman who someone else has abandoned in an equally disgraceful way.³²

Recognizable in these criticism are the Irish practice of ready divorce and preference for endogamy. Also notable in both letters are the references to law; the problem here is a conflict of laws, canon law and the native Irish laws discussed above, which Lanfranc dismisses as the “law of fornication.”

Canterbury’s attempt to extend its ecclesiastical jurisdiction to Ireland failed. A century later, however, when the English king Henry II extended his secular control across the Irish Sea, he did so with explicit ecclesiastical support — as almost a holy war.³³ In a letter written to Henry II after the invasion, to congratulate him on its success, Pope Alexander III repeats the pattern set by

Lanfranc’s letters of highlighting marriage as a particularly problematic practice among the Irish. He writes that

This people, as perhaps has come to the attention of your majesty more fully, openly cohabit with their stepmothers and do not blush to bear children by them; a man will misuse his brother’s wife while his brother is still alive; a man will live in concubinage with two sisters and many have intercourse with the daughters of mothers they have deserted.³⁴

Here, as in Lanfranc’s letters, the Irish preference for endogamy is recognizable and polygamy appears as an additional cause for concern. Henry’s invasion of Ireland is justified, according to Alexander, because it will “eradicate the filth of such great abominations.”³⁵ Likewise, in his “Topography of Ireland,” Gerald of Wales calls attention to the Irish preference for endogamy and cites it as the reason why so many of the Irish are born blind, lame, maimed, or with other natural defects. It is, he writes, “No wonder if among an adulterous and incestuous people, in which both births and marriages are illegitimate, a nation out of the pale of laws, nature herself should be corrupted by perverse habits.”³⁶

While issues about marriage were thus used to justify the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in theory, in practice that event was framed by two different kinds of marriage arrangements. According to both Anglo-Norman and native Irish sources, the Anglo-Norman entry into Ireland was precipitated by the abduction of Dearbhforghaill, the wife of Tighearnán Mór Ua Ruairc, by Diarmait Mac Murchada. Different texts, however, give different motivations for this event. Gerald of Wales, in his “History” of the invasion, attributes it to Dearbhforghaill’s passion for Mac Murchada, writing that she “allowed herself to be ravished and not against her will.” According to Gerald, she is an example

of women’s fickleness and of the evils that they bring.³⁷ However, it is very possible that it was Dearbhforghaill’s own influential family (her father was king of Meath) that arranged for her transfer from one man to another as part of a change in their political alliances. It seems to have been a common practice for Irish women of elite families to make multiple marriages as part of their families’ changing political strategies.³⁸ Again coincidentally, or perhaps not, Dearbhforghaill is identified as the builder of the Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, which is the site of an early Sheela-like sculpture.³⁹

In revenge for the abduction of Dearbhforghaill, Ua Ruairc had Mac Murchada banished overseas. Mac Murchada then sought out Henry II in Aquitaine and, after swearing loyalty to him, received a promise of aid in regaining his kingdom. His primary Anglo-Norman ally, Earl Richard Fitzgerald or Strongbow, was then lured to Ireland by the promise of a marriage. In return for helping Mac Murchada, Strongbow was promised his daughter Aoife as wife and through her the succession to his kingdom. This marriage took place in 1170 and Strongbow inherited Leinster at Mac Murchada’s death. The legality of his inheritance under native Irish law, which restricted inheritance by or through a woman (see below), has been questioned in modern scholarship—but it happened.⁴⁰ This kind of intermarriage, between Anglo-Norman men and Irish women, continued in the years to come. Such marriages made the exogamous unions that church reformers insisted upon take on a specific social significance as they became ways in which land and power passed into Anglo-Norman hands. Hugh de Lacy, for example, married a daughter of Ruaidri Ua Conchobair in

approximately 1180 even as he conquered Connacht and perhaps planned to take over all of Ireland.⁴¹

III. Degeneration and Assimilation

Intermarriages between the Anglo-Normans or English and the native Irish continued into the later Middle Ages. However, the meaning of such marriages changed as they came to be identified by the English administration in Ireland as a source of loss for the English community, a cause of “degeneration”—the loss of nation or race. Intermarriage between the English and Irish communities was repeatedly outlawed, in 1346, 1366, and 1402.⁴² As with the repetition of provisions against endogamy during the twelfth century, this repetition gauges the failure of this legislation to change people’s practices: intermarriages continued to take place, sometimes with explicit permission and sometimes without.⁴³ Marriage thus continued to be a site of tension in Ireland even as it became a motor for the assimilation of the English and Irish communities and so the production of a third group, the gaelicized Anglo-Irish population.⁴⁴ One sign of both the tension around the family in later medieval Ireland and the assimilation of the different communities is the construction of the tower-house castles, as defended domestic environments, by the elites of all three groups. As these castles became the new architectural contexts for Sheela sculptures, so these issues around marriage would have shaped the sculptures’ significance for their viewers.

Tom McNeill argues that the proliferation of tower-house castles in later medieval Ireland should be seen as the result of a change in the structure of lordship; a loosening of power on the part of the major lords that allowed lesser men to lay claim to land and power through the construction of these castles.⁴⁵ One example of this process is the history of the powerful Anglo-Norman de Burgh lineage in later medieval Ireland. The story of the devolution of de Burgh land and power begins with a marriage, that of Elizabeth, daughter of William de Burgh, to Lionel, the son of the English King Edward III, in 1352. Through his wife's right, Lionel became Lord of Connaught and Ulster, the far west and north of Ireland. Elizabeth and Lionel's daughter, Philippa, married the Englishman Edmund Mortimer in 1368 and he expected to acquire Connaught through her. However, other members of the extended de Burgh family in Ireland had already been assimilated to native Irish culture through intermarriage.⁴⁶ The marriages of these two women among the English created conflict within the family because of the differences between English and native Irish law as they related to women and inheritance.

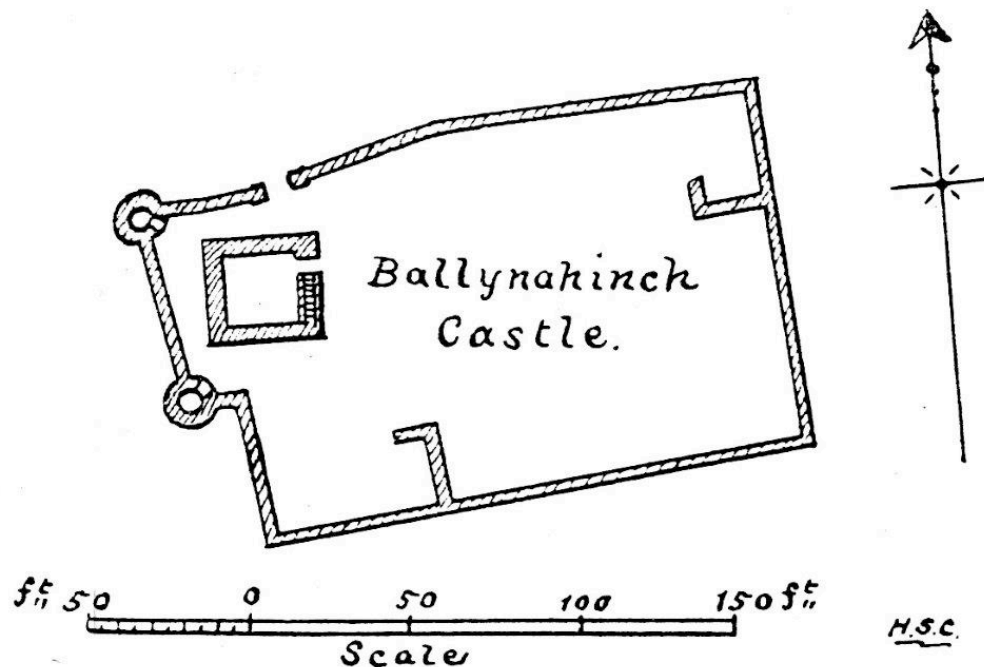
In Irish law, although a woman could inherit moveable goods and a portion of any newly acquired land, she could never fully inherit patrimonial or *fintiu* land. The most she could inherit was a life-interest in that land as a “*banchomarba*” or “female heiress,” an interest that she could not transmit to her husband or to her children.⁴⁷ Under English law, by contrast, a woman could inherit land and it could be inherited through a woman by her spouse or offspring.⁴⁸ The assimilation of some members of the de Burgh family to Irish

culture would have produced for them an expectation derived from Irish law of the dispossession of women, their husbands, and their children. At the same time, the marriages of Elizabeth and Philippa among the English would have led their husbands to expect the transfer of land and lordship away from the de Burgh men and into their hands. Rather than accept that loss, many of the de Burghs in Ireland “went Irish” as the various “Burke” clans in order to preserve their rights to the land.⁴⁹ One way in which they established their claims to land and power was through the construction and occupation of tower-house castles; for example, the Ordnance Survey documents numerous castles built and/or occupied by the Mac William Burkes in Co. Mayo.⁵⁰

IV. Tower-House Castles and “Sheela-na-gig”

Tower-house castles served a variety of functions. First, they had some defensive capabilities. Ballynahinch castle in Co. Tipperary is typical of this type of structure and consists of a stone tower keep inside a stone walled courtyard or bawn (fig. 4). The keep has a highly defensible doorway, discussed below, and a look-out station on the top of its tall north wall. The outer bawn wall also has defensive turrets.⁵¹ However, McNeill downplays the actual defensive capabilities of the tower-houses and emphasizes instead their display of defensiveness. He argues that the castles were made to look defensive, to present a powerful military face as part of a display of their owners’ wealth and power.⁵² Secondly, tower house castles also functioned as domestic environments for those who lived within their walls. For their inhabitants, the central tower keep organized space

through a vertical stratification, a division between low and high that corresponded to divisions between public and private space and between people of low and high social status.⁵³ The low area of the bawn was the most public part of the castle and the place where those of lower status worked to meet the needs of those who lived within the tower's walls. Inside of the tower, on the third floor at Ballynahinch, was the hall; a higher status but still relatively public area where the lord and his family met and mingled with those from below. Above the hall, on the fourth floor at Ballynahinch, were small private chambers for the high status inhabitants of the castle.⁵⁴



4. Plan of Ballynahinch Castle, Co. Tipperary, Ireland. Reproduced from Henry Crawford, "Ballynahinch Castle, County Tipperary," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 36, no. 4 (1906): 423, Fig. 1

These elevated, high-status, private spaces were frequently feminine spaces, where the women of the family could be kept isolated and protected — protected in particular from sexual encounters with men below or outside.⁵⁵ The use of a Sheela sculpture in such an environment projected a grotesquely open female body onto the exterior wall of the containing keep. For medieval viewers, such a sculpture may have become meaningful through its opposition to the female bodies enclosed within the tower walls. At Ballynahinch, a Sheela sculpture is located above the doorway that gave access to the keep’s interior and so potentially to the women within. This sculpture thus seems to speak of the openness of the doorway below as a weakness in the castle’s defenses by likening it to the openness of the female body and its potential danger for the men of the *fine*, family, or community, as defined by the laws and practices described above. However, this doorway is actually highly defended. It has a murder-hole in its ceiling, an opening from a chamber above through which oil or pitch, arrows or stones, could be dropped onto any invaders. The juxtaposition of the Sheela with the doorway may have likened the oil or pitch that flowed through its murder hole to a woman’s menstrual flow, which some medieval authorities understood to be a toxic substance.⁵⁶ This feminized opening in the defensive walls was therefore a site of heightened danger for unwelcome outsiders, rather than for the owners and inhabitants of the castle. Locating a Sheela sculpture in proximity to this doorway would thus have allowed the castle’s builders and owners to use what contemporary discourses and practices identified as the dangerous

openness of the female body to defensive effect on their own behalf. The sculpture’s display of a grotesquely open female body would have become part of the building’s overall display of its defensive capabilities.

In sum, the location of Irish Sheela sculptures on tower-house castles points towards the consequences of women’s reproductive potential for the family as the proper context for understanding these striking images. Marriage and inheritance laws and practices identified women’s reproductive capacity as an opening to the outside and so as a potential site of loss—whether for the men of the *fine* through a fatherless child, for the Irish in the face of the Anglo-Norman invasion, or for the English community in later medieval Ireland. As conflict over marriage laws and strategic intermarriages were contemporary with the introduction of the Sheela sculptures into Ireland, these issues may have framed Irish audiences’ understandings of these images from the start. In a strategic reversal, the eventual use of these images on the exterior walls of castles would have turned the threat posed by women’s reproductive openness around to become part of the buildings’ display of defensive power to potential invaders.

The Ordnance Survey *Letters*, finally, provide one more suggestion of links between the Sheelas and castles, families, and women’s reproductive role, as these issues were assembled in Irish oral tradition in the nineteenth century. In a letter also written from Co. Tipperary, John O’Donovan writes that the Kiltinane church and/or Ballyfinboy castle Sheelas were “set up to annoy the descendants of Sheela Ny-Gigg, who was such a woman as Grania Wael (O’Mailey) was in Connaught.”⁵⁷ Here the term “Sheela-na-gig,” under a slightly different spelling,

is used not as the name of a type of sculpture, but as the name of the individual that these sculpture represent. It seems as if O'Donovan heard stories of this Sheela that reminded him of tales he had already heard of another woman while in the west of Ireland and that he neglected to write down. O'Connor likewise mentions Sheela and the “censorious narrators of the incidents connected with her life,” indicating that he too heard stories about this woman that he likewise chose not to record.⁵⁸

O'Donovan's likening of Sheela to Grania or Grace O'Maily (or O'Malley), however, provides an indication of what these lost stories would have been like. O'Donovan recorded a number of tales about Grace and very similar stories about a third woman, Nuala “of the knife” or Nuala na Meaoige ny Fionachtaigh. They are each said to have founded branches of the Burke clan, the gaelicized descendents of the de Burgh lineage whose historical origins were discussed above: Grace O'Malley as the mother of Tibbot na Long Burke was remembered as the ancestress of the Mac William Burkes, and Nuala as the mother of David Burke was said to be ancestress of the Mac David Burkes.⁵⁹ Nuala's son David was said to have been the bastard of Richard Finn Burke and her preference for her child over her brothers was remembered as leading to her natal family's loss of power to the Burkes.⁶⁰ She was thus remembered as having been for her own kin that dangerous opening to the outside that allowed power to drain away to an illegitimate son – even as she was remembered an ancestress for the Burkes. Both Grace and Nuala, furthermore, are remembered in the Ordnance Survey *Letters* as the builders and occupants of numerous castles in County Mayo and

County Galway.⁶¹ Local traditions thus remembered issues of women and family, property, and power, as having been at stake in the construction and occupation of these structures.⁶²

Lastly, both Grace and Naula are remembered as having once spurred a reluctant son into battle by “raising her petticoats,” an act of genital self-display that directly recalls the Sheela sculptures.⁶³ The woman’s self-display here becomes an aggressive act directed against a son perceived as weak, perhaps reminding him of where he came from as a way of asserting the mother’s power over him. The stories of Sheela that resembled these tales of Grace and Nuala would have tied the sculptures that bear her name into this tradition of family-founding, castle-buildings, self-assertive, and so self-displaying women. Such tales would have put the issues of women, family, and power discussed above for medieval Ireland together in a different way, as they would have been stories of a woman who escaped the enclosure of a family castle to become a castle-builder herself and to become famous—or really infamous—not as a protected wife or daughter, but instead as a powerful mother.

¹ The Kiltinane church sculpture disappeared in 1990. See the Fethard Historical Society website <http://fethard.com/histor/sheela.html> (accessed September 19, 2011).

² Ordnance Survey of Ireland, *Letters containing information relative to the Antiquities of Ireland... Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey*, reproduced under the direction of Rev. M.O. Flanagan (Bray, 1933). Co. Tipperary, II, 436-7.

³ Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Tipperary, II:441.

⁴ On the Ordnance Survey see Marian Bleeke, “George Petrie, the Ordnance Survey, and Nineteenth-Century Constructions of the Irish Past,” in *Medieval Art and Architecture after the Middle Ages*, ed. Janet T. Marquardt and Alyce A. Jordan (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 129-148.

⁵ See Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1986).

⁶ Marian Bleeke, “Sheelas, Sex, and Significance in Romanesque Sculpture: The Kilpeck Corbel Series,” *Studies in Iconography* 26 (2005): 1-26.

⁷ There may have been subtle differences in the functions of these buildings for members of different communities and there is a debate in the scholarship over whether the structure of the buildings themselves differed. See Tadhg O’Keefe, “Concepts of ‘Castle’ and the Construction of Identity in Medieval and Post-medieval Ireland,” *Irish Geography* 34, no. 1 (2001): 69-88; Rolf Loeber, “An Architectural History of Gaelic Castles and Settlements, 1370-1600,” in *Gaelic Ireland ca. 1250 – ca. 1650: Land, Lordship, and Settlement*, ed. Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards, and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 271-314; Rory Sherlock, “Cross-cultural occurrences of mutations in tower-house architecture: evidence for cultural homogeneity in late medieval Ireland?” *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 15 (2006): 73-91.

⁸ On dating, see Edith Guest, “Irish Sheela-na-gigs in 1935,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 66, no. 1 (1936): 107-29, at 121; Guest, “Some Notes on the Dating of Sheela-na-gigs,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 69, no. 2 (1937): 176-80; Anthony Weir, “Exhibitionist and Related Carvings in the Irish Midlands: Their Origin and Function,” in *Irish Midland Studies*, ed. Harman Murtagh (Athlone: Old Athlone Society, 1980), 57-62, 70; and James Jerman, “The ‘Sheela-na-gig’ Carvings of the British Isles: Suggestions for a Reclassification and Other Notes,” *Co. Louth Archaeological and Historical Journal* 20, no. 1 (1981-84): 10-24, at 15-16, 24. In general, Guest and Weir argue that the sculptures be seen as contemporary with their surrounding structures, while Jerman argues that the Sheelas in castle contexts should be understood as re-used from churches.

⁹ F.R.S.A.I., “Figures known as Hags of the Castle, Sheelas, or Sheela na gigs,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 24, no. 1 (1894): 77-81, 392-94.

¹⁰ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, 1988), 1.

¹¹ Nerys Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 6-8, 15-16, 37-39, 50-59; and Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), 85, 103-4.

¹² The emphasis on divorce in the *Cain Lanamna* indicates that it was an acceptable and relatively common occurrence. The interest in the text is on the property division that divorce necessitates. See Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 73, 267, 269; Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 295; and Donnchadh O Corrain, “Marriage in Early Ireland,” in *Marriage in Ireland*, ed. Art Cosgrove (Dublin: College Press Ltd., 1985), 8-9.

¹³ The first set of distinctions is based on the amount of property that the man and woman brought to the marriage at its inception: see Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 70-71; Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 296; and Nancy Power, “Classes of Women Described in the Senchas Mar,” in *Studies in Early Irish Law*, ed. D.A. Binchy (Dublin: RIA and Hodges Figges and Co., 1936), 81-2. The second set is based on who was responsible for a woman’s fines and liabilities and who was entitled to monies paid for an

offense done to a woman and to her assets upon her death. See Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 295; Power, “Classes of Women,” 81, 98-99; and Miles Dillon, “The Relationship between Mother and Son, Father and Daughter, and the Law of Inheritance with Regard to Women;” and D.A. Binchy, “Appendix: Family Membership of Women,” in *Studies in Early Irish Law*, 161-3, 182.

¹⁴ On polygamy see Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 70-71; Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 289; Power, “Classes of Women,” 85; and Bart Jaski, “Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages,” in *The Fragility of Her Sex?: Medieval Irishwomen in their European Context*, ed. Christine Meek and Katherine Simms (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 35-6.

¹⁵ Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 70-71; Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 296; and Power, “Classes of Women,” 81-82.

¹⁶ Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 70-71; Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 289, 296, 302-303; Power, “Classes of Women,” 83-85, 93-103; and Gearoid Mac Niocaill, “Christian Influences in Early Irish Law,” in *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche in Frhmittelalter/Ireland and Europe: The Early Church*, ed. Proinseas Ni Chathain and Michael Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cota, 1984), 154-55.

¹⁷ Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 313; and Power, “Classes of Women,” 103.

¹⁸ The *fine* was organized into different levels of kin, the most important being the *gelfhine*, the male descendants of a common grandfather. It was through the *gelfhine* that men acquired rights to *fintiu* land. With no known father, a man would lack such rights. Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 207-209, 245-6, 259, 268; and Lisa Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 141-43.

¹⁹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 89-92, 142; and Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 218, 228, 244-45.

²⁰ Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 313; on women’s need to establish *fine* affiliation for their children see Bitel, *Land of Women*, 89-92.

²¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 96. “*Gormac*,” another term for a sister’s son referred to such a son who had close ties to his mother’s kin and was helpful to them, but who left the group to inherit in his father’s *fine*.

²² Bitel, *Land of Women*, 92, 96, 103, 142; and Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 320-21.

²³ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 41.

²⁴ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 67, 80-81; and Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 313.

²⁵ Aubrey Gwynn, *The Irish Church in The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992), 156-57, 166, 171-74; and John Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), 8-9.

²⁶ See Map I in Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, 126-7.

²⁷ Gwynn, *The Irish Church*, 220; and Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, 220.

²⁸ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 60-61; and Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 26, 228, 244-45, 288.

²⁹ Gerald of Wales, “History of the Conquest of Ireland,” in *The Historical Works of Geraldus Cambrensis*, trans. Thomas Forester (London: H.G. Bohn, 1863), 232-34; and Gwynn, *The Irish Church*, 306-7.

³⁰ Gwynn, *The Irish Church*, 69-78; and J. A. Watt, *The Church and the Two Nations in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 6-9, 217-25.

³¹ Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, eds and trans., *The Letters of Lanfranc Archbishop of Canterbury* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 69.

³² Clover and Gibson, *Letters of Lanfranc*, 71.

³³ Prior to the invasion, in approximately 1155, Henry received explicit authorization to invade Ireland from Pope Adrian IV in a bull known as “*Laudabiliter*.” As recorded in Gerald of Wales’ “History of the Conquest of Ireland,” the bull authorizes Henry to enter Ireland in order “to extend the borders of the church, to teach the truths of Christian faith to a rude and unlettered people, and to root out the weeds of wickedness from the field of the Lord,” Gerald of Wales, “History of the Conquest of Ireland,” 261. The authenticity of “*Laudabiliter*” has been disputed in scholarship, see Watt, *The Church and the Two Nations*, 35-36, n. 3.

- ³⁴ The full text of this letter is quoted in Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, 37-39.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, 38.
- ³⁶ Gerald of Wales, “The Topography of Ireland,” 147.
- ³⁷ Gerald of Wales, “History of the Conquest of Ireland,” 184-5. The *Song of Dermot and the Earl*, on the other hand, gives the initiative to MacMurchada and attributes his act to love, although to a love he feigned in order to get revenge for an ancient wrong: see Denis L. Conlon, ed. *The Song of Dermot and Earl Richard Fitzgerald* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1992), 5-7. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* agree in giving the initiative to Diarmait, but attribute his act instead to his “insatiable, carnal, and adulterous lust. However, this text also mentions Dearbhfhorgaill’s brother Maeleachlainn as being somehow involved in her abduction: see Denis Murphy, ed., *The Annals of Clonmacnoise: Being the Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408*, trans. Conell Mageoghan (Dublin: The University Press for the Royal Society of Antiquities of Ireland, 1896), 199-200.
- ³⁸ Marie Therese Flanagan, *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship: Interactions in Ireland in the Late Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 92-99; Lahney Preston-Matto, “Derborgaill’s Literary Heritage: Can You Blame Her,” *CSANA Yearbook: Law, Literature, and Society* 7 (2008): 77-92.
- ³⁹ Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, “But What Exactly Did She Give?: Derbforgaill and the Nuns’ Church and Clonmacnoise,” in *Clonmacnoise Studies: Seminar Papers 1998*, ed. Heather A. King (Dublin: Dept. of Environment Heritage and Local Government, 2003), 175-207; Karen Eileen Overby, “Female Trouble: Ambivalence and Anxiety at the Nun’s Church,” *CSANA Yearbook: Law, Literature, and Society* 7 (2008): 93-112; Jennifer Borland, “Audience and Spatial Experience in the Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise,” *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 3 (September 2011): <http://www.differentvisions.org/>.
- ⁴⁰ Conlon, ed. *The Song of Dermot and Earl Richard Fitzgerald*, 25-6, 103; John O’Donovan, ed., *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters from the Earliest Period to 1616*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co, 1856), II: 1177. On the question of the legality of Strongbow’s inheritance, see Flanagan, *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship*, 80-81, 91-92.
- ⁴¹ Sean Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 93-94.
- ⁴² Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages*, 142, 152; Art Cosgrove, *Late Medieval Ireland, 1371-1541* (Dublin: Helicon Limited, 1987), 4-5; Kenneth Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), 16-17, 144, 162, 168.
- ⁴³ Cosgrove, *Late Medieval Ireland*, 13-14, 77-78; Duffy, *Ireland in the Middle Ages*, 161, 171-73.
- ⁴⁴ On the “gaelicized” Anglo-Irish see Cosgrove, *Late Medieval Ireland*, 5, 26-30, 72-76.
- ⁴⁵ Tom McNeill, *Castles in Ireland: Feudal Power in a Gaelic World* (London: Routledge, 1997), 203-9, 222-28.
- ⁴⁶ Sir William Liath de Burgo, for example, was both the son and the husband of an Irish woman. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland*, 16-17.
- ⁴⁷ If a man had no son, then his daughter could inherit a life-interest in his *fintiu* land as a *banchomarba*. The native laws promoted such a woman’s reintegration into her father’s *fine* through a close endogamous marriage so that her sons could inherit the land, officially, from their father. On inheritance law and the *banchomarba* see Bitel, *Land of Women*, 89; and Patterson, *Cattle-Lords and Clansmen*, 208, 228, 244-45, 288, 292.
- ⁴⁸ Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland*, 59, 160-61.
- ⁴⁹ James Lydon, *Ireland in the Later Middle Ages* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1972), 52-53. For another example of the conflict caused by female inheritance see Cormac O Cleirigh, “The Absentee Landlady and the Sturdy Robbers: Agnes de Valence,” in *The Fragility of her Sex?*, 101-118.
- ⁵⁰ Burke family castles in Co. Mayo included Corclogh castle, Carrickanass castle, Ballyloughmask castle, Cluain-na-g-Caisiol, Caislean na Caillghe, Ballynahyny castle, Ballycorra castle, and CionnLocha castle – all in Kinlough parish – and Cregduff, Ellestron, and Killernan castles – all in Kilmainemore castle. They also occupied Caislean na Daoile and Caislean A’Ropaidh, which had been built as Barret family

strongholds. See Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Mayo, I: 51-52, 58-59, 103, 257, 272, and II: 86, 194, 201, 239-40, 244.

⁵¹ Henry Crawford, “Ballynahinch Castle, County Tipperary,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 36, no. 4 (1906): 423-24.

⁵² McNeill, *Castles in Ireland*, 220-35.

⁵³ Susan Margaret Conrad, “The Household Structure of the Medieval Castle and the Organization of Space: From the Eleventh through the Fourteenth Centuries” (MA thesis, California State University at Fullerton, 1992), 85, 95-96, 103-6.

⁵⁴ Crawford, “Ballynahinch Castle”, 424. On the interior organization of tower house castles, see Rory Sherlock, “Changing Perceptions: Spatial Analysis and the Study of the Irish Tower House” *Château Galliard* 24 (2010): 239-250; and his, “The Evolution of the Irish Tower House as Domestic Space,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C: Archaeology, Linguistics, and Literature* 111C (2011): 115-40.

⁵⁵ Mary McAuliffe, “The Lady in the Tower: The Social and Political Role of Women in Tower-House Castles,” in *The Fragility of her Sex?*, 153-54.

⁵⁶ Conception during menstruation was often cited as a cause of leprosy, for example, and menstruating women were thought to stain mirrors and poison the air. See Saul Nathaniel Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 54-55; Francoise Beriac, *Histoire des Lèpreux au Moyen Age: une Société d'Exclus* (Paris: Editions Imago, 1988), 22-23; and Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 52; Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Melierum with Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 129-131.

⁵⁷ Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Tipperary, I: 316c.

⁵⁸ Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Tipperary, II: 434.

⁵⁹ On Grace O'Malley see Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Mayo, I, 2-4, 10, and II, 26-27, 249-58. On Nuala see Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Galway, II, 304-6. Grace O'Malley actually existed and there are records of her activities in the papers of the English administration during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. See Anne Chambers, *Granuaile: The Life and Times of Grace O'Malley, c. 1530-1603*, revised ed. (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998).

⁶⁰ Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Galway, II: 304-6.

⁶¹ Grace O'Malley is said to have built Dunah castle, Doonath castle, Caiseal Laithmine, Rockfleet castle, and Kaldavnet castle, all in Co. Mayo: Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Mayo, I: 165-66, 328, 488, and II: 10, 345. Nuala is said to have built the castles of Ballyglass, Glinisc, and Lahrin, all in Co. Galway. Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Galway, I: 69-70, 73, 103-4. A third woman who appears in the Letters and is likened to both Grace and Nuala is Nora na gCaiselean or Nora of the Castles, see Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Galway, II: 68.

⁶² The Ordnance Survey *Letters* contain multiple stories about women that are also stories about castles; see, for example, the story of Castle Fearnach and the daughter of the King of Meath, Co. Westmeath, vol. I: 60; and of the construction of Dun Gel castle by Rois Mhor ni Ghairbhe, Co. Louth, 313.

⁶³ Ordnance Survey *Letters*, Co. Galway, I: 74-5.