

# A 'Wyfis Sawe'

## Antifeminism, Jurisprudence, and Critical Reading in the Older Scots 'The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis'

**Abstract** This article shows that the later-15th-century Older Scots version of the 'Seven Sages of Rome' matter, 'The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis', contains an especially provocative rendering of jurisprudence that emphasises pragmatism and constitutionality over direct investigation of the alleged crime. Yet the singular female voice found in the frame narrative, that of the empress, problematises male claims to juridical procedure and due process. Her resistance fundamentally destabilises the narrative premise and exposes the misogynistic content as a diversion from the primary mode in which the narrative operates: 'mirror for princes'. Whether in 'mirror for princes' or exemplary narrative, the onus is on the recipient to delve beneath allegorical symbolism and poetic embellishment to discover the appropriate and morally edifying message; this is a process inherently open to variability and instability. This study undertakes a narratological analysis to untangle the judicially relevant bias encoded by the narrator and reflected in the male characters', in particular, antifeminist bias. The empress is positioned as a dissenting voice that signals the need for a level of scepticism conducive to critical exposition. This discordant female voice thus demands that assumptions and surface-level conclusions be reassessed within the scope of a narrative characterised by its multiple subjectivities and interpretations.

**Keywords** Older Scots; Seven Sages of Rome; Narratology; Gender; Mirror for Princes

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*Than said scho: "Lord, now schawis wele,  
 þour callit son is bot a devill,  
 That schupe him thus me to deflour."  
 The lord had slane him in that hour.<sup>1</sup>*

Then she said: "Lord, now it is evident [that] your so-called son is but a devil that set himself thus to deflower me." The lord [would] have slain him that hour.

This is the initial accusation of attempted rape voiced by the empress in the Older Scots version of the 'Seven Sages of Rome', 'The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis' (hereafter 'BSS'), dated to the last quarter of the 15th century. Remarkably, the empress declares to her husband, the emperor Dioclesiane, that the attempted rape imperilled her virginal status. This is significant, for the emperor does not contradict her claim and, in fact, acts immediately and decisively in support of her accusation. Later that evening, the empress reasserts her sexual status without protest from Dioclesiane; she refers to her virginity a third time in the latter third of the frame narrative.<sup>2</sup> This series of declarations convincingly indicates that their marriage must be unconsummated. In other examples of the matter, the empress tells her stepson that she is a virgin in a bid to seduce him. However, when the empress subsequently accuses the emperor's son of attempted rape publicly, she does not mention this fact; in some cases, the narrator makes clear that the marriage was consummated before the fateful encounter between empress and stepson.<sup>3</sup>

The empress' virginity undoubtedly heightens the tension of the resulting case, but it also adds a new dimension to the fraught judicial process, since the empress' sexual status is used as evidence for whether the death sentence is warranted. In the following, I resituate the text as a narrative of exemplarity requiring critical engagement on behalf of recipients, whether in a mediaeval or modern context. From the outset, the narrator establishes the empress' accusation as fake. The pervasive antifeminist rhetoric of the sages – evident, for instance, in their mobilisation of the perennial tropes of women as inherently deceitful and prone to adultery – reinforces the empress as manipulative, destructive, and sexually

1 Buuren 1982, ll. 247–250; all translations from Older Scots my own.

2 Ibid., ll. 277–286, 2095–2106.

3 Cf. John Rolland's 'Seuin Seages' (1560), where a passage of thirty-five lines describes the consummation, the emperor's resulting obsessively enamoured condition, and the wife's later realisation that she is unable to conceive a child (Rolland 1932, ll. 640–675); in the Midland version, the emperor and empress first discuss his son's visit while they lie in bed together (Whitelock 2005, ll. 261–290).

deviant and thereby attempts to invalidate her words and actions.<sup>4</sup> Yet her vocal resistance to the pre-ordained outcome of the ‘trial’ problematises calls for precedent and procedure variously made by the male interlocutors at a fundamental level: her testimony, or *sawe*, emphasises that a ruler should be able to detect the biases of his advisors and his resulting decisions should reflect this critical sensitivity. Consequently, this study re-centres the didactic character of the poem: as an example of ‘mirror for princes’ literature, ‘BSS’ highlights discernment and interpretation as key skills for the judicious ruler – a process of development only achievable through a “poetics of multiple voices” wherein the empress’ range of politically savvy tales provides the most agile selection of instructive *exempla*.<sup>5</sup>

The transmission and reception of the ‘Seven Sages’ matter generally and ‘BSS’ specifically in mediaeval Scotland remains a relative mystery. ‘BSS’ is recorded only in the Asloan manuscript, *terminus ad quem* 1515, which was compiled by the Edinburgh notary public John Asloan. The poem survives in its own fascicle with wear on the outer-facing leaves, suggesting its life previously unbound from the compendium – a pattern seen across the manuscript.<sup>6</sup> The most recent editor of ‘BSS’, Catherine VAN BUUREN, dates the text to the last quarter of the 15th century, likely towards the earlier part of this period, c. 1470–1485. ‘BSS’ derives primarily from the ‘*Historia septem sapientum*’ (c. 1330), although there is evidence that the anonymous Scottish author may have had access to a version of the text based on the Old French prose version ‘*Roman des sept sages de Rome*’.<sup>7</sup> Currently, the only extant material evidence of ‘Seven Sages’ in Scotland before 1500 arises from ‘BSS’ itself; furthermore, it is not related to any of the eight versions in Middle English, nor is it the predecessor to John Rolland’s 1560 Scots rendition, ‘*Seuin Seages*’.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the ‘Seven Sages’ redaction found in the Asloan manuscript represents a unique branch of transmission and reception.

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4 Bernau 2012 provides an overview of the varieties of antifeminist writing, broadly defined as writing espousing the ‘inferiority – physical, intellectual, and moral – of women’ (p. 72), circulating in the mediaeval period. On mediaeval misogyny and antifeminist literature, see also Blamires 1992 and Bloch 1991.

5 Bildhauer 2020, p. 119.

6 Cunningham 1994, pp. 129, 132 f.

7 Buuren 1982, pp. 180 f. This possibility is mainly predicated on the corresponding order of stories.

8 Couper 2002, p. 453. The Middle English versions ultimately derive from the Old French prose version (commonly designated as Version A). On the relationship between the various Middle English versions, see Whitelock 2005, pp. xx–lvi. ‘*Seuin Seages*’ derives from ‘*Historia septem sapientum*’ by way of William Copland’s c. 1550 reproduction of Wynken de Worde’s c. 1515 translation.

## 1 Reading Antifeminist Bias Narratologically

Outlining the discursive contours designed to erase the empress as a legitimate diegetic voice is an essential first step in recovering the narrative's complex engagement with legal systems and the 'mirror for princes' mode. As in other versions, after his first wife's death, the emperor is counselled by his noble advisors to take a second wife to secure his dynasty by producing more progeny. In 'BSS', Dioclesiane verbally expresses hesitancy and concern over this proposition: *I am of age, | And a 3oung wyf in hir barnage | Mycht be the cause to abrek my lyf* ("I am of age, and a young wife in her youth might be the cause to abbreviate my life").<sup>9</sup> His objections centre on the concept of a wife in her *barnage* ("youth" or "childhood"). The term bears relation to the Older Scots legal term *perfit eild* from the Latin, *perfecta aetas*, which stipulated the legal age of competence: for girls, the legal age of marriage was twelve; for boys, fourteen.<sup>10</sup> Broadly speaking, this overlaps with the age of childhood or youth associated with *barnage*. In the late mediaeval period, the ages of women that took part in royal marriages typically ranged from twelve to twenty, and although there was no canon law preventing immediate consummation, marriages were more typically consummated after puberty or between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.<sup>11</sup> Based on these grounds, we may speculate that Dioclesiane associates this mortal danger with a wife between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

The introduction of a very young queen from a foreign court and its potential political and personal ramifications would have been culturally relevant in Scotland both during the text's original composition, c. 1470–1485, and its later preservation in the Asloan manuscript, c. 1515. In Scotland there was a generational pattern of young foreign queens during the 15th and 16th centuries: James II (b. 1430) married Mary of Guelders (b. 1434/35) in 1449 when she was fourteen or fifteen, and she gave birth to their first son in 1450. James III (b. 1451/52) was betrothed to Margaret of Denmark (b. 1456) in 1468 when Margaret was twelve, and the marriage officially took place in 1469 when Margaret was thirteen; she gave birth to their first son, James IV, in 1473 when she was still sixteen. James IV married Margaret Tudor (b. 1489) in 1503 when she was thirteen (and he was thirty); she gave birth to their first son, James, Duke of Rothesay, in 1507 when

<sup>9</sup> Buuren 1982, ll. 121–123. Cf. Rolland's 'Seuin Seages', where the emperor himself stipulates that his second wife should be of *tender age* (Rolland 1932, l. 536) and a *clene Virgin* (ibid., l. 538). The counsellors subsequently negotiate a contract with the King of Sicily to marry his fourteen-year-old daughter to the emperor (ibid., ll. 546–550).

<sup>10</sup> On the legal age of betrothal and marriage in late mediaeval Scotland, see Parker 2015, esp. p. 174. See also Orme 2001, p. 329.

<sup>11</sup> There is evidence that legal provisions to prevent consummation until the age of sixteen or thereabouts were not uncommon. See Phillips 2003, pp. 36–42.

she was seventeen. Although it would be imprudent to ascribe the text itself as relating too specifically to any one reign or monarch, the historical reality of royal marriage in mediaeval Scotland underscores Diocesiane's concerns over the age of a prospective second wife.

While the historical context regarding (royal and foreign) teen brides is certainly provocative, there is a more immediate literary reference point that echoes the mistrust of young women voiced by Diocesiane. The prose text 'The Spectacle of Luf' (hereafter 'SL') is another unique survival of the Asloan manuscript of uncertain origin, which is attributed to a "G. Myll" and internally dated to 1492.<sup>12</sup> In this 'paternal advice/wisdom' tract, a father describes a litany of murderous, sexually deviant, and deceitful women to his son. A number of these *exempla* derive from classical sources, which the father liberally alters in favour of sensationalising the tales. While the misogynist content of the discourse itself, especially the series of anecdotes enumerating the murderous and incestuous acts perpetrated by young women, virgins, and wives, obviously resembles the generally antifeminist tone of 'BSS', a comparison to 'BSS' is particularly relevant as regards the positioning of the narrator and the speakers to indicate narratological (un)reliability and (un)trustworthiness.

In exploring the multiple subjectivities at play in 'SL' and 'BSS', it is useful to consider narratological approaches to assessing speech and dialogue proposed by critics such as Nine MIEDEMA and Bettina BILDHAUER.<sup>13</sup> In a general sense, my reading of the various tale-tellers and the implications for how we understand narrative 'truth-making' is informed by BILDHAUER's ground-breaking reassessment of Johannes de Alta Silva's 'Dolopathos', in which she cogently argues that we, as readers and critics, must re-evaluate our assumptions regarding the reliability of omniscient heterodiegetic narration and, consequently, take into account a "poetics of multiple voices" – in this, we must resist what BILDHAUER refers to as "deeply entrenched modern understandings of the contract at work in fiction, by which recipients trust an omniscient narrator unless they have a reason to consider them unreliable".<sup>14</sup> BILDHAUER goes on to elucidate the ways in which "the narrator's

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12 Martin 2009 identifies John Gower's 'Confessio Amantis' as a likely (stylistic) source for 'The Spectacle of Luf'.

13 Miedema 2010 and Bildhauer 2020.

14 Bildhauer 2020, p. 119. Bildhauer builds on recent work on unreliability and untrustworthiness with particular attention to Vera Nünning. In the introduction to that volume, Nünning notes how Wayne C. Booth's seminal study of unreliable narration focused on the homodiegetic narrator against whom the reader and author collude "behind his back" (Nünning 2015a, pp. 2–5; Booth 1961, p. 304) and proposes instead that more nuanced theoretical frameworks and evaluative categories should be developed to account for a wider range of narrator typologies. See especially Nünning 2015b, p. 104, where she concludes that many of the categories she proposes do not graft onto mediaeval literary modes and styles easily.

axiological bias, specifically their hatred or fear of women, is so extreme that it may well lead them to misrepresent even the facts of events in the storyworld – as far as we can speak of facts in a fictional universe – accurately, too”.<sup>15</sup> In both ‘SL’ and ‘BSS’, this axiological bias appears at extra- and intradiegetic levels; the ways in which these narrative levels interlace benefit from closer analysis.

This impetus towards realigning our critical approaches in recognition of the differences between mediaeval and modern strategies of narrative creation coincides productively with MIEDEMA’s analysis of the applicability of modern conceptualisations of dialogue analysis to mediaeval texts. In her study of historical narratology, she establishes patterns of dialogue construction vis-à-vis direct speech, indirect speech, and internal ‘thought’ speech as well as the intentionality of such rhetorical features in mediaeval writing.<sup>16</sup> MIEDEMA tracks the appearance of the narratorial ‘I’ alongside the *inquit* formula as means for directing sympathy and interpretation.<sup>17</sup> She finds that the influence of this narratorial ‘filter’ is evident in the proportion and distribution of verbs of speech and illocution as well as the portrayal of the inner life of characters through the exposition of internal thought.<sup>18</sup> Her analysis eventually establishes the viability of locating reflections of a narratorial voice in the speech acts of characters within the diegesis. MIEDEMA proposes that the withdrawal of the narrator behind intradiegetic speech facilitates a greater immediacy in the rendering of narrative events while still allowing the narrator to steer the narrative ‘silently’. She contends the result of this structure is that: “Die Autoren solcher Texte verließen sich offensichtlich nicht auf die Fähigkeit der Rezipienten, die Dialoge selbständig zu interpretieren, sondern versuchten eine deutliche Steuerung” (“The authors of such texts evidently do not rely on the ability of the recipients to interpret the dialogues independently; rather, they strive for distinct control”).<sup>19</sup> This proposition is acutely relevant not only to our idea of the ‘contract at work in fiction’ but also to the ‘contract at work’ in mediaeval collections of fables or moralising tales, which demand critical close reading and analysis by the recipient.

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15 Bildhauer 2020, p. 124.

16 Miedema 2010, esp. pp. 36–38. Fludernik 2010 productively discusses modes of consciousness in the context of the representation of thought and interiority (“psychonarration”, p. 281) in mediaeval texts.

17 Miedema 2010, p. 40.

18 Minet’s quantitative and contextual analysis of verbs associated with verbal, cognitive, and legal activities in the Greek and Syriac versions of the ‘History of Sindban/Syntipas’ in this special issue complements Miedema’s approach and provides a promising model for similar textual analysis in ‘BSS’, where a systematic method of assessment should further develop the type of narratological framework set out here.

19 Miedema 2010, p. 49. All translations my own unless otherwise noted.

In the prefatory comment to ‘SL’, the heterodiegetic narrator, posed as the translator, claims that it is a translation from a Latin work and immediately establishes a set of expectations for the narrative: *I tuk a lytill buk in latyn to paß mye tyme ze quhilk as I had red and consederit me | thocht ze mater’ gud and proffitable to be had in our’ wulgar’ and matarnall toun* (“I took a little book in Latin to pass my time which, as I read and considered, I thought the matter good and profitable to be [translated] in our common and maternal language”).<sup>20</sup> The ‘I’ of this text asserts the authority of the original work as a *buk of latyn*, citing the content as morally edifying and subsequently implying that the narrator-translator is qualified (and thus trustworthy) as an interpreter and judge of the moral value of the work; that they have the authority and the means to disseminate the material beyond a Latin-literate milieu. These expectations are radically undercut, and the text becomes rather a discourse characterised by irony, insofar as the father drastically misrepresents his story matter and the son persistently misunderstands whatever exemplary truths are purportedly contained therein. By contrast, the narratorial ‘I’ is completely absent in ‘BSS’. Despite the apparent absence of this ‘controlling’ force, there are several crucial moments that draw attention to the narrator withdrawn behind the diegesis. I argue that the silence of the narrative voice in ‘BSS’ is only broken when it attempts to steer perceptions of the empress’ motivations and behaviours. Although these interpolations do not create ironic effects, they do draw attention to the adjudication of credibility by casting negative bias on the empress at important narrative moments. In this way, the poem participates in the same tradition of (dubious) narratorial control and its concomitant claims to authority and credibility.

A closer look at ‘SL’ reveals the destabilising effect that arises at the conjunction of narratorial bias, antifeminism, and discordant diegetic content. In this case, the father’s anecdotes undertake lurid alterations to well-established story matter. Several examples suffice to gain an impression of the material: the father laconically relates the tale of Philomela, Procne, and Tereus: *It is reid of þe quene progenye for displezar scho at hir lord teryus cuttit hir sone in pecis and maid him to be þeruit in a sew befor hire husband in dispyte* (“it is read of the queen [Procne] out of displeasure with her lord [Tereus] cut her son into pieces and made him into a stew to be served before her husband in spite”).<sup>21</sup> His version of the tale omits Tereus’ rape of Philomela and instead claims that Procne, unprompted and purely out of spitefulness, murders her son and feeds him to Tereus. The most common Latin source for the tale is Book VI of Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’, and, indeed, elsewhere the father refers his son more broadly to Ovid’s authority on matters of

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20 Craigie 1923, p. 272.

21 Ibid., p. 278.

wemen of tender ȝeris ("women of young age") for whom *cruelte and delectatioun of lechorye* ("cruelty and delight in lechery") is common.<sup>22</sup> More locally, the tale appears in Middle English in Gower's 'Confessio Amantis' and Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women'. Each version varies in details and characterisation; however, all identify the sexual assault of Philomela as the precipitating factor in the filicide. Similarly, the father misconstrues the tale of Nisus, Scylla, and Minos by claiming that a fourteen-year-old Scylla beheads her sleeping father and then presents his head to Minos.<sup>23</sup> This version of events diverges dramatically from Book VIII of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', where she shears off a lock of her father's magical purple hair, which she then attempts to gift Minos. Lastly, in an inversion of the 'calumniated queen' motif, the father tells of a fourteen-year-old maiden who, with the help of her nurse, deceives her father into impregnating her. Once the pregnancy is revealed, the father exiles the daughter to sea in a small boat and immolates the nurse before he dies from *gret malancoley and displesour* ("great melancholy and grief").<sup>24</sup>

There is an immediate resonance between Dioclesiane's expressed fear of a *ȝoung wyf in hir barnage* and the misogynist rhetoric of 'SL', but also between the use of discordant storytelling in both texts. The retold classical tales in 'SL' unequivocally and jarringly decontextualise the events of those narratives to present women as inexplicably evil. It is manifestly 'tale telling', and the presumed recipients would have found these alterations instantly recognisable, not least because the father unabashedly names Ovid as his source. The consequence of this contrast between the translator's claims to moral edification and the fictional tale-teller's obvious unreliability and untrustworthiness is that the antifeminist tract appears deeply ironic and, perhaps, even an outright mockery of this type of writing. Emphatically, this reading does not preclude a potential audience who may have derived enjoyment from exaggerated stories about homicidal and sexually deviant women. It does, however, alter the terms in which we understand the speakers in 'SL' to be reliable, credible, or sincere *and* our knowledge of how a mediaeval audience would have perceived these narratological qualities. It is this narratological and tonal instability that should be critically assessed in any text purporting to have a didactic purpose.

Returning to 'BSS', we may observe a similar pattern of offering a misogynistic presentation of old tales that recipients can either enjoy as such or recognise as ironically undercut by the obvious bias of the narrator. From the very moment that the concept of a new empress is voiced, the audience is predisposed to expect

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 285, with reference to *þe bukis of ouid* ('the books of Ovid') and specifically to the story of Hypsiplye and Jason, which is found in Ovid's 'Heroides'.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 282 f.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 284 f.



a woman of relatively young age who bears, at least, a nebulous existential threat to Dioclesiane and his kingdom and, at most, active homicidal intent; this seed of ominous foreshadowing has been planted with precision. These expectations are, of course, met. The empress supposedly plots to kill her stepson, Dioclesiane II, shortly after arriving. Following a sparse one-line description of the marriage and only ten lines after the emperor expresses his fear, the narrator makes their first omniscient interpolation:

*Bot quhen scho hard he had a son,  
With the sevyne sagis wit to cone,  
Scho thocht allway to haf him deid  
And hir sone air in-till his steid.<sup>25</sup>*

But when she heard that he had a son, [who resided] with the seven sages to be educated, she thought always to have him dead and her son heir in his place.

As in other versions, the narrator asserts unambiguously the empress' homicidal intent and asserts that Dioclesiane is unaware of her *wikit thocht* ("wicked thoughts").<sup>26</sup> This moment comprises the single instance in the frame where the internal thoughts of a character are reported to the audience.<sup>27</sup> The narratorial bias entrenches the antifeminist tenor of the poem and obscures the more complex portrayal of courtly politics central to the frame narrative. A perceptive reader can discern, despite the narrator's condemnation of the empress alone, that actually all characters at the court aim to mislead the emperor. He is assailed from all sides – by noble advisors, a new wife, a son with an inexplicable malady, and his son's intellectual guardians – and must discern how to navigate these conflicting pressures and demands in the best interest of his kingdom.

The narrator clearly presents a disjunction between the word, action, and interiority of the empress. In the empress' stately entrance to the hall (where she will first approach Dioclesiane II), for example, the narrator highlights the unknown motive for her "blithe" demeanour:

*God wait gif scho was blyth to cum,  
Quhen she that scho herd that he was dvm.*

<sup>25</sup> Buuren 1982, ll. 131–134.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 143.

<sup>27</sup> On the distribution of thought expression in mediaeval texts (physically manifested, verbalised, and reported), see Fludernik 2010.

*With ladyis in purpour and in pall  
Blythly come scho in the hall; [...].<sup>28</sup>*

God knows if she was glad to come when she heard that he was mute.  
With ladies in purple and rich clothes blithely she came into the hall.

Contrary to the rhetorical assertion of unknowing, the narrator's *God wait* rather introduces the idea that the empress is glad of the child's newly mute state. Simultaneously, her perfect appearance and manners insinuate a deceptiveness that cannot be read by the emperor within the diegesis.

This contrasts with Dioclesiane II's authentic expression of his own inner state and his ability to see through her outer appearance. When the empress proposes that he accompany her so that she might determine the cause of his voice loss, *his* body language betrays *her* bad intentions:

*Than by the hand scho couth him tak;  
He wryth the face and drewe abak,  
Quhill that his fader bad him rys,  
Than hvmlly on curtas wys  
To his fader he bowit and rais, [...].<sup>29</sup>*

Then she took him by the hand; [Dioclesiane II] averted his face [in anger/distaste] and drew back, until his father bade him to rise; then he humbly in courteous manner bowed to his father and rose.

Dioclesiane II, already established as skilled in esoteric methods of prognostication, physically recoils from the empress in foreshadowing of his similar physical reaction to her advances only lines later: *with that the barne scho wald haf kist; | He threwe the face and gart hir mist* ("with that she would have kissed the child; he contorted his face and made her fail").<sup>30</sup> Dioclesiane II, while just about main-

<sup>28</sup> Buuren 1982, ll. 209–212.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 219–223.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 239f. New facets appear if we consider that the emperor's son is presumably of an age with the empress: he is ten years old when the narrator finishes describing his academic progress and returns to the emperor's court to describe the entrance of the new empress. If we allow the supposition that the empress is approximately between twelve and fifteen, it becomes clear that the predatory older woman motif seen in other versions of the tale is inoperable. We are also confronted with the eventuality that two pre-teen or teenage individuals are at the centre of this story of sexual misconduct.

taining courtly standards of etiquette and obedience, is authentic in his physical rejection of the empress' advances.<sup>31</sup>

Not only the empress, but also the first sage, Bantillas, who accompanies Dioclesiane II to court, misleads the emperor. Initially, the sages predict that they will be executed whether they accept or refuse the summons to court, but Dioclesiane II discovers a solution in the stars: he will go to court but remain silent for seven days, thereby protecting himself and his coterie of tutors. Yet the narrator does not comment on Bantillas' deception negatively when he neglects to tell the emperor why Dioclesiane II has suddenly lost the power of speech. Rather, he says: *Schir, be this buke | And all the athis that may be sworne, | He spak full weile the day at morne* ("Sir, by this book and all the oaths that may be sworn, he spoke well this morning").<sup>32</sup> While strictly true, it leaves out some crucial details, such as the fact that the oath of silence is voluntary and time-banded.

The picture we begin to see is one where the emperor is surrounded by individuals driven by their own self-interested motivations: the counsellors who desire to ensure dynastic security for the kingdom and, later, that the rule of law is upheld in order to maintain Rome's international reputation; the sages who desire not to be executed; the son who wishes to preserve his life and dynastic position; and the empress who desires to consolidate her power by eliminating the pre-existing heir. Whether this self-interest is seen to be commendable or reprehensible, the sages and the empress, especially, mislead Dioclesiane to achieve their ends. It is only the empress' deceptive behaviour that the narrator judges negatively, not commenting on the gap between the intentions and actions of Bantillas and the son. An attentive reader or listener, however, has the option to resist this narratorial steer.

## 2 Jurisprudence, Antifeminism, and Recovering Critical Moral Exposition

The emperor's and the recipients' need to detect deception is also mobilised in this text as an essential part of the justice system, a legal interest shared with much contemporary Scottish literature. This chapter opened with the empress' initial accusation against Dioclesiane II of attempting to take her *virginity* against her consent – a claim that becomes the key piece of evidence dictating whether the son's attempted rape warrants the death penalty. The empress repeats her claim

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31 On the gendered dimensions of courtliness, see Eming in this special issue.

32 Buuren 1982, ll. 202–204.

when her husband finds her in distress after he suspends the execution for the first time:

*The emprys murnyt and maid gret cair  
And be the rutis raif hir hair.  
He sperit quhy: "ʒe knawe full wele;  
ʒe hecht to revenge me of this devill  
That schupe to fyle my womanhed,  
That he suld dé ane schamis deid,  
And now ʒe haf that quyte forʒet."*<sup>33</sup>

The empress moaned and expressed her grief and tore at the roots of her hair. [Dioclesiane] asked why: "You know full well; you vowed to revenge me of this devil who set himself to defile my virginity, that he should die a shameful death, and now you have completely forgotten."

It is at this point that she offers her first story (known by its Latin title of 'Arbor'). The emperor directs her to relate this tale with no further comment on her accusation or its particulars.

Jurisprudence in this narrative universe ultimately favours investigation of the general credibility and trustworthiness of witnesses (and counsellors) over the question of whether there was an attempted assault.<sup>34</sup> This rhetorical focus on pragmatism and discernment reflects quintessential features of the Scottish 'mirror for princes' tradition as well as moralising tale collections broadly. Sally MAPSTONE describes how it was unlikely a coincidence that this type of writing flourished in Scotland owing to the succession of minority rules throughout the entirety of the 15th century and into the sixteenth, wherein the guardianship of the young ruler was an influential factor in the distribution of power in the factionalised magnatial system prevailing in Scotland. She especially notes the unique prominence of legalistic language in the Older Scots tradition and the concomitant importance placed on the constitutionality and accountability of the monarchy.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., ll. 277–283. The term *womanhed* can mean both the state of being a woman, and chastity or virginity. Although Buuren 1982 defines *womanhed* as "womanhood", this quotation is used as an example for the meaning "chastity, virginity" in the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/womanhede> (accessed: 15/12/2022). Elsewhere, the empress uses *deflour* (e.g. ll. 249, 2097), so the sense here should relate to the physical state of virginity rather than the spiritual state of chastity. On the distinction between virginity and chastity, see Coyne Kelly 2000, pp. 2–7.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Bildhauer 2020, p. 132, where she contends that the accusation of attempted rape is similarly displaced as the central narrative concern in the 'Dolopathos'.

<sup>35</sup> Mapstone 1986, pp. 1–12.

In ‘BSS’, we observe this pattern at work: first, Dioclesiane’s counsellors approach him with the entreaty: *For and our enemys mycht knawe | That ane suld dé withoutin law, | Thai suld sclander the richt of Rome* (“on that account [if] our enemies were to know that one should die without law, they would slander the rule [i.e. governing body of laws] of Rome”).<sup>36</sup> Separately, Bantillas advances this political angle when he argues the finer points of sentencing relating to rape rather than denying the occurrence of the attempted assault itself. He concedes that, according to Roman law, the death penalty is only warranted in the rape of a virgin, but his testimony undercuts this concession by rejecting the empress’ virginal status:

*Be Romys lawis he suld nocht dé,  
Suppos he wald haf forsit the quene,  
Bot gif that scho a madin had bene.  
He may nocht dé, schir, be the lawe,  
And sla ze him for your wyfis sawe,  
Als gret mischance sall fall ze [...].*<sup>37</sup>

By Rome’s laws he should not die [in the case that] he would have forced the queen [i.e. raped her], unless she were a maiden. He may not die, sir, by the law, and [if] you slay him by your wife’s testimony, then great misfortune will befall you.

Bantillas’ opening diversionary gambit grants the monarch what MAPSTONE would deem “high constitutional and symbolic status” while forwarding “an essentially pragmatic view of the monarchy”<sup>38</sup> by appealing to the emperor’s role as the ultimate judicial authority and, simultaneously, seeking to emphasise the necessity of a functioning judiciary system that follows due process in criminal proceedings. Notably, he frames the case as deeply consequential as a domestic *and* public legal matter by identifying the empress as queen and wife. The latter title is used in the moment he questions the credibility of the empress’ *sawe*, thus linking domestic disorder (unruly wife) with national disaster (kingdom with no heir). In MAPSTONE’s words, “the king as the chief representative of justice [should] keep his house in order”.<sup>39</sup>

Refractions of the narrator’s axiological antifeminism in the diegesis arise in Bantillas’ first tale, ‘Canis’, in which a wife mistakenly believes her infant has

<sup>36</sup> Buuren 1982, ll. 267–269.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 386–391.

<sup>38</sup> Mapstone 1986, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

been killed by the family greyhound. Upon discovering her dead child, Bantillas reports, *Than cryit the lady as scho war wod; | Syne to the erd scho fell richt thar | And with hir handis raif hir hair* ("Then the lady cried as if she were crazed and fell to the ground right there and tore at her hair with her hands").<sup>40</sup> Once she tells her husband the reason for her grief, he immediately slays the dog before discovering that the loyal greyhound defended the child against a serpent. Bantillas' reading of the tale suggests women are driven to hasty conclusions based on incomplete or inaccurate knowledge of a given situation and that their testimonies might lead men to similarly precipitous judgments. Strikingly, it is in this moment that we detect the steering narratorial filter: Bantillas was not witness to the earlier interaction between the empress and Dioclesiane where she *be the rutis raif hir hair*, yet the repetitious descriptive language alerts the audience to the similarities of behaviour between the two women and thereby draws together apparently compartmentalised aspects of the diegesis.

This meshing together of discrete narrative units is also evident in the tale told by the fourth sage ('Tentamina'), which features a young wife who commits increasingly rebellious acts until her older husband has her bled to the point of death. In reference to the positioning of this tale more widely in 'Seven Sages' matter, Yasmina FOEHR-JANSSENS notes that 'Tentamina' "operates as a kind of *mise en abyme* of the collection as a whole and of the frame story" in terms of its repetitive structures, the spouses' roles and the similarities between the tests to which the wife is put and the tales 'Arbor' and 'Canis'.<sup>41</sup> 'Tentamina' implicitly integrates and consolidates the mounting body of antifeminist evidence within the frame and the embedded tales; this collation of 'reality' and *exemplum* insists on positioning the empress as a paradigm of moral corruption, and it reveals the encoded bias driving the recipient interpretation. This narratological bias should thus be re-evaluated within the framework introduced by BILDHAUER, which questions the status of the text as a unified narrative offering one 'absolute' truth.<sup>42</sup>

To this end, the empress is positioned as a critically dissenting voice to this otherwise prescriptive view. Her bitter despair at the course of events serves as a counterweight demanding awareness of the text as a self-contained (and artificial) series of instructive dialogues. When she next appears, exasperated and incredulous, she rejects the seemingly pointless cycle of instruction: *Quhar-to? At 3ow thar may na sample do!* ("To what point? For you, no example may suffice!")<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Buuren 1982, ll. 460–462.

<sup>41</sup> Foehr-Janssens 2020, p. 176.

<sup>42</sup> Bildhauer 2020, p. 126.

<sup>43</sup> Buuren 1982, ll. 1613f.

The empress' increasing resistance culminates after the next round of tales. She seems finally to have reached her limit and rejects the proceedings wholesale:

*He sperit of hir diseis the quhy;  
Scho said: "Ȝe wait als wele as I!  
Ȝour sone that schupe me to deflour  
And to Ȝour self (do) dishonour.  
Ȝe hecht I suld revengit be,  
Bot it is lytill scaith to me,  
For quhen Ȝour sagis has Ȝow slane  
My frendis may mary me agane."  
[...]  
He bad hir tell the maner haile;  
Scho said: "Quhat makis it avale?"<sup>44</sup>*

He inquired to the cause of her disease; she said: "You know as well as I! Your son who set himself to deflower me and do you dishonour! You vowed that I should be revenged, but it is little harm to me, for when your sages slay you, my friends may marry me again." [...] He bid her to tell of the whole matter; she said: "To what avail?"

The empress certainly gives a deft rhetorical performance in this exchange – as evident in her dismissive rejoinder that if Dioclesiane follows the sages he will end up dead, while she will be alive and remarried. Yet her remarks position her as the only participant who questions the trial and its foregone conclusion. In the loosest sense, the scene brings to mind the comically exasperated father and obstinately unteachable son in 'SL', and her salient questioning should recall readers to other self-reflexive tale collections, such as Robert Henryson's 'Morall Fabillis', where the audience is immediately suspicious of any pre-packaged moral exposition owing to the occasionally confounding narratorial *moralitates*. In fact, Henryson instructs his readers to analyse his fables carefully and to form their own interpretations based on *ernistfull thoctis and in studying* ("toilsome thoughts and in studying").<sup>45</sup> What happens when we view the empress as the agent signalling to the audience that they should be active readers wary of any pre-ordained 'absolute' truth?

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., ll. 2095–2102, 2107f.

<sup>45</sup> Henryson 2010, l. 25.

Each of the tales told by the sages confirms “culturally established schemata and scripts” that arise from the initial characterisation of the empress as wicked.<sup>46</sup> Diocesiane is pre-disposed to expect this type of conduct from a young wife, and the latter tales told by the sages confirm his worldview. In sinister anticipation of later events, the emperor reacts to ‘Puteus’ by calling for the immolation of the fictional wife, a fate to which he ultimately condemns his ‘real-world’ wife. While this rampant antifeminism may represent the male discourse at work in the narrative, is it the only ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ perspective? I contend that the empress represents an alternate subjectivity which ought to inform our reading beyond the misogynistic bias encoded by the narrator. I have only begun to uncover the complex arrangement of narrative perspectives informing the structure and rhetoric of ‘BSS’. There are many fruitful avenues yet to be discussed: an ampler discussion of the text as ‘mirror for princes’, its relation to other texts in the Asloan manuscript and to other Scottish tale collections, and its disposition in connection to other ‘Seven Sages’ narratives, to name only a few possibilities. This fresh strategy of reading realigns our perception of how narratological structures control recipient interpretation and, consequently, alerts readers to the necessity for active and critical excavation and analysis in mediaeval didactic writing.

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<sup>46</sup> Margolin 2015, p. 34.



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