

Essay 2

In the crowded Annals of medieval Ireland, texts are incredibly saturated with the births, deaths, and martial exploits of kings where women appear only rarely, and are almost always as additions or after thoughts to male narratives. When a woman does break into the historical record with something approaching a sustained and well recognized presence, it is worth pausing to ask why, and what the terms of her visibility tell us about the world in which she lived. Any interpretation of any medieval woman's life is often less about recovering a factual biography and more about disentangling history from propaganda, gendered storytelling, literary mythmaking and the generalized pawn making of women in the medieval political, social and cultural sphere. An accurate portrait and portrayal of a real woman in the medieval period is not without challenges to say the least.

Gormflaith ingen Murchada, born around 960 in Naas, County Kildare, (dying in 1030) is one of the most well known and significant female figures in early medieval Irish history. She was queen three times over, or possibly twice, depending on which source one trusts, and her reputation falls across some of the most dramatic events of the Viking-Gaelic era, including the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, one of the defining confrontations and battles of the Irish Middle Ages. The visibility that makes Gormflaith so compelling is also what makes her so difficult to read and understand. Most sources that preserve her are moderately hostile, written long after her death, and shaped by dynastic and literary agendas. This essay examines those sources critically, assesses their reliability, reconstructs what can be known of her life, and considers what makes Gormflaith a uniquely significant figure in the broader landscape of medieval European queenship and womanhood.

The historical documentation for Gormflaith ingen Murchada falls into three broad categories, including the *Irish Annals*, which are the most straight forward evidence, the *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh* (*The War of the Irish with the Foreigners*), and the Old Norse saga known as *Njáls Saga*. Each text or sections of texts presents distinct problems of reliability, and it is only by comparing all the

available evidence across them that scholars have been able to construct even a tentative portrait of the woman herself.

The earliest surviving annalistic reference to Gormflaith appears in the *Annals of Inisfallen*, compiled at the island monastery of Inisfallen in Lough Leane, County Kerry. Its entry on Gormflaith's death reads simply, "The daughter of Murchad son of Finn, queen of Munster, dies." The brevity is characteristic of the genre, as the Irish Annals are not narrative works but brief ecclesiastical calendars, in which women appear only when their identity is directly relevant to the dynastic record.^{1,2} As mentioned, this was only in relation to the men they were in relationship with. That said, this entry is significant because it was composed at the latest some sixty-two years after Gormflaith's death. The identification of her as daughter of Murchad son of Finn, paired with the title "queen of Munster", leaves scholars in little doubt that this is a reference to Gormflaith, the real woman herself, since Brian Boru was king of Munster and Gormflaith's father was Murchad mac Finn, King of Leinster.

The *Annals of Tigernach*, probably originating at Clonmacnoise and surviving in the fourteenth-century manuscript Rawlinson B 488, provide the next major annalistic notice, "Gormlaith, daughter of Murchad, son of Finn, mother of Sitric, son of Amlaíb Cuarán, king of the Foreigners, and of Donnachad, son of Brian, king of Munster, died." The *Annals of Ulster* corroborate this, recording her as "Gormlaith, daughter of Murchad, wife of Brian." The *Chronicon Scotorum* similarly notes her death and parentage.^{3,4} These annalistic entries, taken together, confirm the core facts... her parentage, her children, and her marriages to Amlaíb Cuarán and Brian Boru. Crucially, they do not record a marriage to Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill, which becomes significant in assessing the reliability of later sources.

¹ Mac Airt, Seán, (ed. and trans.), *The Annals of Inisfallen (MS Rawlinson B 503)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951).

² Ó Corráin, Donncha, *Ireland Before the Normans* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), pp. 42–43.

³ Stokes, Whitley, (ed. and trans.), 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Revue Celtique*, 16 (1895), pp. 374–419; 17 (1896), pp. 6–33, 119–263, 337–420; 18 (1897), pp. 9–59, 150–197, 267–303.

⁴ Mac Airt, Seán and Mac Niocaill, Gearóid (eds and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), AU 1030.4. Online: <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100001A/index.html>.

Gormflaith also appears in the *Banshenchas* ('woman-lore'), a twelfth-century catalogue of famous and powerful Irish women composed in 1147 by Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside of Ard Breacán in Meath, preserved in the Book of Leinster (c.1150–1201) along with other manuscripts.⁵ The *Banshenchas* entry echoes the annalistic material but introduces the famous 'three leaps' poem, "Three leaps did Gormlaith perform which no other woman shall do till Doomsday: a leap into Dublin, a leap into Tara, a leap into Cashel." Some scholars read the 'three leaps' as evidence of three marriages, to Amlaíb Cuarán at Dublin, to Máel Sechnaill at Tara, and to Brian at Cashel while others argue that the phrase refers metaphorically to children or political connections rather than marriages. As scholar Máire Ní Mhaonaigh discusses in her essay '*Tales of Three Gormlaiths in Medieval Irish Literature*', the three historical queens named Gormlaith were partially conflated in the literary tradition, ultimately complicating any straightforward use of the poem as historical evidence.⁶

By far the most extensive portrayal of Gormflaith appears in the *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh*, the biography of Brian Boru written between 1103 and 1113, the date of composition argued by Ní Mhaonaigh in her 1995 *Peritia* article, in the service of the Dál Cais dynasty.⁷ Scholar Thomas A. DuBois, in his study of the *Cogadh* and *Orkneyinga Saga* notes that from the language of the *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and its textual references, as well as the work's panegyric tone, many scholars have come to the conclusion that it was composed in the court of Brian's great grandson Muirchertach Ua Briain. Its primary intent was likely to demonstrate the natural right of the Dál Cais to the high kingship of Ireland.⁸ In the *Cogadh*, Gormflaith appears in a memorable scene at Kincora in which she receives her husband Brian's tunic and, rather than sewing a silver button upon it as requested, casts it into the fire and begins to instead, incite her brother Máel Mórda to rebel against Brian.⁹ In this portrayal, she is the meddlesome sister goading the

⁵ Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside; see the standard edition by Margaret Dobbs (ed. and trans.), 'The Ban-shenchus', *Revue Celtique*, 47 (1930), pp. 282–339; 48 (1931), pp. 163–234; 49 (1932), pp. 437–489.

⁶ Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, 'Tales of Three Gormlaiths in Medieval Irish Literature', *Ériu*, 52 (2002), pp. 1–24, at pp. 1–4 and pp. 17–24.

⁷ Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, 'The Date of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*', *Peritia*, 9 (1995), pp. 354–377.

⁸ A. DuBois, Thomas, 'Juxtaposing *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* with *Orkneyinga saga*', *Oral Tradition*, 26.2 (2011), pp. 267–296.

⁹ Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, 'Tales of Three Gormlaiths in Medieval Irish Literature', *Ériu*, 52 (2002), pp. 20–21.

king of Leinster toward the catastrophe that was Clontarf and ultimately Brian's death. From this lens, she is possibly used as a literary instrument of harsh propaganda.

The Old Norse *Njáls Saga*, composed in Iceland around the 1280s, includes an account of the Battle of Clontarf in which Gormflaith appears under her Norse name Kormlöðr. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, in their translation, render her description as follows, "She was endowed with great beauty and all those qualifications which were outside her own control; but it was commonly said that whatever was under her own control was evil." In the saga, she is not the inciter of her brother Máel Mórda but of her son Sigtrygg Silkbeard, and is explicitly described as Brian's divorced wife "bent on revenge."¹⁰ She also promises her hand in marriage simultaneously to both Earl Sigurd of Orkney and Brodir of Man in exchange for their military support against Brian, a narrative detail that is almost certainly fictional. As DuBois observes, this behaviour "harkens back to Medb of the Táin and her similar tactics",¹¹ placing Kormlöðr firmly within a literary archetype of the goading woman, whose closest parallel within *Njáls Saga* itself is Hallgerðr, who refuses her husband a strand of her hair to restring his bow at the moment of greatest need.¹²

Any legitimate engagement with Gormflaith's life must address the fact that there is, in actuality, a hierarchy of source reliability. At the top of this hierarchy sits the Irish annals. Despite their possible biases, the *Annals of Inisfallen* favour Munster kingship and they are brief, near-contemporary in their compilation, and consistent with each other on the basic facts of Gormflaith's identity. Scholar Daniel McCarthy's analysis of the *Annals of Tigernach* and the *Chronicum Scotorum* has shown that within these chronicles possess a unique error-correction basis that makes them more reliable for the time period.¹³ The annals' skeletal quality is itself

¹⁰ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans.), *Njal's Saga* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), Chapter 154 (the description of Kormlöðr).

¹¹ A. DuBois, Thomas, 'Juxtaposing *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* with *Orkneyinga saga*', *Oral Tradition*, 26.2 (2011), p. 282.

¹² Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Jóhanna, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 55–80.

¹³ Mc Carthy, Daniel, 'Analysing and Restoring the Chronology of the Irish Annals', in Ralph Kenna, Pádraig MacCarron, and Máire MacCarron (eds), *Maths Meets Myths: Quantitative Approaches to Ancient Narratives* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2017), pp. 177–198.

a form of evidence and these are not narrative constructs designed to flatter or to damn anyone, but simple and straightforward bureaucratic records noting deaths and major events. It's worth noting that although these were usually straightforward entries, if there were any extreme scenarios that occurred related to a person's death, they were sometimes included. If she was truly a malevolent figure from the Irish lens of things, it could have arguably been mentioned, but it wasn't.¹⁴

The genealogical texts, the *Banshenchas* and the Book of Leinster genealogies occupy a middle position in the reliability hierarchy. They were composed more than a century after Gormflaith's death and drew heavily on oral tradition. Their purpose was commemorative and dynastic rather than strictly historical, and they are susceptible to elaboration, and the insertion of mythological patterns. Gregory Toner, in his 2018 Cambridge lecture *Manifestations of Sovereignty in Medieval Ireland*, asserts that future scholars abandoned the real women for mythical homogeneity, a process in which the historical Gormflaith was possibly overlaid with the Irish sovereignty-goddess archetype. This was known as the *flaith* figure who passes between kings as a living embodiment of the land's legitimacy.¹⁵ The 'three leaps' poem is a case in point, its elegant symmetry, three leaps, three kingdoms, three beds, is precisely the kind of formulation suggesting literary shaping rather than historical reporting. These types of literary tools attempted to reduce complex power struggles between men as well as reduce negative assumptions on male reputations or reduce their perceived downfall by their own hand. In Gormflaith's case, this was an easy task to achieve based on her various intimate and political relations with the Norse.

The *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh* is the most problematic source of all. Ní Mhaonaigh, who has published the most authoritative source criticism of the text, made the important point that the work draws on annalistic sources but distorts them substantially in its second narrative half, which concerns Brian Boru.¹⁶ In their 2018 Royal Society analysis, Ralph Kenna, Pádraig MacCarron and Máire

¹⁴ Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, An File. 1982. *Baile Átha Cliath: Foilseacháin Rialtais*. Pg. 40.

¹⁵ Toner, Gregory, *Manifestations of Sovereignty in Medieval Ireland*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures, 29 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2018), p. 4.

¹⁶ Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, 'Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib and the Annals: A Comparison', *Ériu*, 47 (1996), pp. 101–126.

MacCarron confirm that it is 'nowadays widely accepted that one of the main aims of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* was to document the achievements of the Dál Cais and eulogise Brian Boru “to create an illustrious past for his dynasty and to underline thereby later Uí Brian claims to political power.” Their overall analysis found that these are critical sources but ultimately, biased. Crucially, the contemporaneous annalistic entries for the years immediately preceding Clontarf record Máel Mórda's raids and Sigtrygg's alliance-building without any mention of Gormflaith's instigation whatsoever, confirming that her role as inciter was even more likely a literary creation.¹⁷

Njáls Saga presents the greatest difficulties of all. Composed around two centuries after Clontarf, in Iceland, in Old Norse, its account of Irish affairs is mediated through oral tradition, Norse cultural frameworks, and the literary conventions of the saga genre itself. There was a cultural *need* for drama. As DuBois illustrates at length, both the *Cogadh* and *Njáls Saga* share, as mentioned, the same goading-woman motif, deploying it in parallel but culturally specific ways. In both Norse and Irish sources, Gormflaith takes the fall in some respects as the quintessential ‘pot stirrer’. The saga's claim that Gormflaith offered herself simultaneously to multiple Norse warlords draws on the same symbolic economy as the sovereignty goddess figure, whose passage and sharing between kings validated their political legitimacy. She was possibly as mentioned, a pawn, as many women of noble birth were, caught in the political crossfire.¹⁸

Scholar Lahney Preston-Matto, in her article '*Queens as Political Hostages in Pre-Norman Ireland: Derbforgaill and the Three Gormlaiths*' offers a very straight-forward framework for reading across these sources. She argues that the three Gormlaiths were probably viewed as sovereignty goddesses, but scholars supplanted real women overtop of them. Specifically, she proposes that the literary agency attributed to Gormflaith, her incitement of Máel Mórda in the *Cogadh*, her incitement of Sigtrygg in the saga, is a form of 'phantom agency'. Essentially, male writers imposed conspiratorial intent onto women whose repositioning between powerful men was in reality a normal and structural feature of Irish political life.

¹⁷ Kenna, Ralph, MacCarron, Pádraig and MacCarron, Máire, 'Network Analysis of the Viking Age in Ireland as Portrayed in *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*', *Royal Society Open Science*, 5.1 (2018), article 171024, pp. 1–20

¹⁸ A. DuBois, Thomas, 'Juxtaposing *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* with *Orkneyinga saga*', *Oral Tradition*, 26.2 (2011), pp. 282–283.

The movement of royal women as hostages and alliance-makers between competing dynasties was normal practice.¹⁹ Her agency and autonomy is essentially, entirely hijacked and possibly fabricated when her intentions are ultimately unknowable.

With these source-critical caveats established, it is possible to reconstruct a provisional historical portrait of Gormflaith. She was, as mentioned, born around 960 in Naas, the ancient royal centre of Leinster in what is now County Kildare.²⁰ Her father was Murchad mac Finn of the Uí Fháeláin branch of the Uí Dúnlainge, the dominant dynasty of Leinster, who died in 972. Her brother was Máel Mórda mac Murchada, who became king of Leinster after their father. Her birth into the highest tier of Irish dynastic aristocracy made her an immediately valuable political asset in a political world. Marriages of the time were not necessarily signs of personal ambition or manipulation but standard instruments of political strategy when women of noble birth often served as alliance-building figures. Seen this way, Gormflaith's life reflects cultural reality rather than exceptional scheming.

Her first marriage was to Amlaíb Cuarán (Óláfr Sigtryggsson), the Norse-Gaelic king of Dublin and formerly of York. This marriage, contracted in the late 960's when she was in her mid-teens, was characteristic of the political landscape of the period. By the mid-to-late ninth century, Viking settlers in Ireland were beginning to ally with Irish kings and agreeing to fight in exchange for land and other resources. Naturally with this typical alliance structure arose arranged marriages on both sides.²¹ Gormflaith's union with Amlaíb was a dynastic contract cementing an alliance between the Leinster Irish and the Norse rulers of Dublin. The marriage produced at least one son of historical significance, Sigtrygg Silkbeard (Sigtryggr Silkiskeggr), who ruled Dublin from 989 to 1036.

Amlaíb Cuarán was defeated at the Battle of Tara in 980 by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill and subsequently withdrew to the monastery of Iona, where he died in 981. The question of what happened to Gormflaith after this point is the most

¹⁹ Preston-Matto, Lahney, 'Queens as Political Hostages in Pre-Norman Ireland: Derbforgaill and the Three Gormlaiths', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 109.2 (April 2010), pp. 141–161.

²⁰ Mac Airt, Seán, (ed. and trans.), *The Annals of Inisfallen (MS Rawlinson B 503)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1951).

²¹ Ó Corráin, Donncha, *Ireland Before the Normans* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), pp. 80–84.

contested in scholarly literature. The *Banshenchas* 'three leaps' poem, taken in the most expansive reading, implies a marriage to Máel Sechnaill at Tara. Preston-Matto argues that Gormflaith was likely taken from Dublin by the high king of Ireland after her husband Amlaíb's defeat in 979, a movement she characterizes as a form of political hostage-taking rather than voluntary remarriage with Máel Sechnaill asserting power over Dublin by repositioning its former queen within his own dynastic orbit.²² No contemporaneous annalistic source confirms this marriage, however, and it should be treated with caution and scepticism.

The marriage that is best attested historically, and most consequential politically, is Gormflaith's union with Brian Boru. This occurred in the aftermath of Brian's victory at the Battle of Glenn Máma in 999, when his forces defeated both Sigtrygg Silkbeard (Gormflaith's son) and Máel Mórda mac Murchada (her brother). Brian's marriage to Gormflaith was a classic instrument of political settlement, where he simultaneously married one of his daughters to Sigtrygg, creating a set of interlocking dynastic bonds designed to neutralise Leinster as a source of opposition.²³ During the years of their marriage, Brian consolidated his claim to the high kingship of Ireland, defeating Máel Sechnaill in 1002. Gormflaith bore him a son, Donnchad mac Briain, who would succeed as king of Munster before dying on pilgrimage to Rome in 1064.

The marriage to Brian appears to have ended before 1014, as *Njáls Saga* presents Gormflaith as divorced by then, while the *Cogadh* implies she was still technically his wife at the time of the fateful tunic episode in 1013. The annals are silent on the question of divorce. Given Brian's documented practice of contracting and dissolving political marriages, he had multiple wives at different points and it is historically plausible that he scorned Gormflaith when the political landscape shifted. What the annals record with certainty is her death in 1030. The *Annals of Ulster* entry gives simply, 'Gormlaith, daughter of Murchad, wife of Brian', confirming her parentage and her most historically significant marriage. She was

²² Preston-Matto, Lahney, 'Queens as Political Hostages in Pre-Norman Ireland: Derbforgaill and the Three Gormlaiths', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 109.2 (April 2010) p 142.

²³ Duffy, Seán, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2014), pp. 56–60.

approximately seventy years old by this time, and she lived long enough to see her son Sigtrygg maintain the kingship of Dublin through and beyond Clontarf.²⁴

What did Gormflaith actually do, in political terms? This question requires careful separation of the literary from the historical. The literary tradition, from the *Cogadh* to *Njáls Saga*, presents her as exercising enormous and destructive influence, as she is the proximate cause of Clontarf in both traditions. Yet the annals attribute no such role to her. The political trajectory toward Clontarf is explicable entirely in terms of structural tensions between the Dál Cais power, the Leinster-Dublin axis, and the external Norse interests of the Orkney earls. As DuBois notes, drawing on Ní Mhaonaigh's (2002) Gormflaith essay and Preston-Matto's (2010) article, scholars have increasingly 'blamed' Gormflaith via 'rhetorical processes' that 'displace political responsibility onto female figures', a move that 'exculpates the men involved'.²⁵

Yet this critical corrective should not lead to the opposite error of dismissing Gormflaith's agency entirely. Within the actual structural logic of Irish political life, her influence was real and significant, operating through different channels than the literary tradition suggests. As a Leinster princess who had been consecutively queen of Dublin, queen (possibly) of Meath, and queen of Munster, she occupied a unique position in the web of dynastic alliances governing early eleventh-century Ireland. Her son Sigtrygg was king of Dublin and her brother Máel Mórda was king of Leinster. The alliance between these two kingdoms, the political foundation of the coalition that faced Brian at Clontarf, was partly a product of the kinship connections that Gormflaith's marriages had created. She was not necessarily the instigator of this alliance in any conspiratorial sense, but nonetheless the reasoning for its existence and embodiment.²⁶

²⁴ *Annals of the Four Masters*, ed. and trans. by John O'Donovan, 7 vols (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, 1851–56), II, sub anno 1030.

²⁵ A. DuBois, Thomas, 'Juxtaposing *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* with Orkneyinga saga', *Oral Tradition*, 26.2 (2011), pp. 282–283.

²⁶ Preston-Matto, Lahney, 'Queens as Political Hostages in Pre-Norman Ireland: Derbforgaill and the Three Gormflaiths', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 109.2 (April 2010). pp. 142–144.

Modern scholars have sometimes risked abandoning the real woman in their pursuit of the mythological one.²⁷ It's an easy assumption to make that she would have had substantial challenges in choosing whose side to support. Gormflaith's relational and structural influence was substantial, even if it was later re-narrated as personal and manipulative. That re-narration tells us possibly more about the anxieties of twelfth and thirteenth-century writers than about her actual conduct. In what respects does Gormflaith stand apart from other medieval women, and what makes her a distinctive figure in the wider history of medieval European queenship?

First and most obviously, the sheer scale of her royal marriages is incredible. By the most conservative reckoning, two confirmed marriages, she was queen of Dublin (one of the wealthiest commercial centres in the Viking world) and queen of Munster (the most powerful Irish kingdom of her day). By the more expansive reading of the 'three leaps' tradition, it's possible she had also been queen of Meath and, within her lifetime, the consort of the three most powerful men in Ireland. This is without recorded precedent in Irish sources, a fact acknowledged even by the *Banshenchas*' declaration as mentioned that 'no other woman shall do till Doomsday' what Gormflaith did, an assertion of her uniqueness that persists even in sources that may have shaped her story negatively.

Second, Gormflaith occupied a uniquely cross-cultural position at a moment of significant political upheaval. She was an Irish Gaelic princess who married into the Hiberno-Norse world through Amlaíb Cuarán, producing a son, Sigtrygg Silkbeard, who was himself a figure of hybrid identity, a king of Dublin whose coinage has been recovered by archaeologists and who commissioned the first Irish Viking coins bearing Christian imagery.²⁸ As DuBois notes, both the *Cogadh* and the Norse sagas “acknowledge extended cultural contact and intermarriage while deploying cultural stereotypes”.²⁹ Her position at the intersection of Gaelic and Norse political culture in the period c.970–1014 is not replicated by any other attested Irish woman of the period.

²⁷ Alfred P. Smyth, Alfred, (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 225–237.

²⁸ Duffy, Seán. *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2014., pp. 78–79.

²⁹ A. DuBois, Thomas, 'Juxtaposing *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* with Orkneyinga saga', *Oral Tradition*, 26.2 (2011) p 281.

Third, Gormflaith is unusual in the degree to which she attracted cross-cultural literary attention. Most Irish medieval queens were entirely invisible to external chronicles and traditions. Gormflaith's mention in the Norse saga tradition places her as one of the most memorable female characters in Norse relations with Ireland. Scholar Gregory Toner, reviewing the scholarship on the sovereignty figure in medieval Irish literature, draws again on Ní Mhaonaigh's analysis to observe that by the twelfth century the three Gormlaiths had become so culturally significant that the mythological *flaith* template, the sovereignty woman who passes between kings, was projected onto all three. This mythologisation, while it convolutes the historical Gormflaith, also acts as a mark exemplifying her significance. She was ultimately too large a figure for the medieval imagination to accommodate within purely historical frameworks.³⁰

In the broader European context, Gormflaith can be compared with other high-profile queens of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, Emma of Normandy (c.985–1052), whose marriages to Æthelred II and Cnut made her twice queen of England under different dynasties, Adelaide of Italy (931–999), whose political survival across multiple dynastic upheavals bears similarities to Gormflaith's repositioning after each husband's decline. However, there are important differences. Emma's story is considerably better documented, largely because she commissioned the near-contemporary *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, which, while propagandistic, preserves her perspective to a degree impossible in the Irish material. Gormflaith left no such commission or was not afforded the opportunity. Her story was told entirely by others, enemies, descendants of enemies, or writers working in cultural frameworks remote from her own, and this fundamental asymmetry between Gormflaith and her better-documented European contemporaries is itself a significant fact about the condition of Irish women in the medieval period.

Within the Irish tradition, the closest structural parallels are the other two Gormlaiths, the ninth-century queen Gormlaith ingen Donnchada Midi, and the tenth-century queen Gormlaith ingen Flann Sinna, whose literary profiles were

³⁰ Toner, Gregory, *Manifestations of Sovereignty in Medieval Ireland*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures, 29 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 2018), p. 4.

partially blended with that of our Gormflaith in the *Banshenchas* and related texts, as Ní Mhaonaigh traces in detail.³¹ Yet even within this tradition of royal women named Gormlaith, the third Gormflaith, our subject stands out as the most textually elaborated, the most politically connected, and the most thoroughly mythologised. Again, the fact that she attracted both an Irish and a Norse literary afterlife is, by itself, without parallel.

Gormflaith ingen Murchada is a woman who exists in history through the distorting lenses of propaganda, literary convention, and mythological projection, and yet who clearly was, in the underlying historical reality, a figure of genuine political substance. The sources for her life, the annals, the dynastic genealogies, the *Cogadh*, and the Norse saga tradition converge on certain basic facts, her parentage, her marriage to Amlaíb Cuarán, her son Sigtrygg Silkbeard, her marriage to Brian Boru, her son Donnchad, and her death in 1030. Everything else, the divorce, the dramatic incitement at Kincora and the simultaneous promises to Norse warlords is likely the invention or elaboration of writers working long after her death, with political and literary purposes to push onto their readers.

What makes her genuinely unique in the landscape of medieval women is not the sensationalism of her literary reputation but the structural reality of her position. She was the daughter, sister, wife, and mother of the most powerful rulers in Ireland at a moment of profound political and cultural transformation. She lived through the final phase of Hiberno-Norse upheaval, the rise of Brian Boru's unprecedented claim to Irish sovereignty, and the catastrophe of the Battle of Clontarf. She survived all of it, and lived on for another sixteen years. In an era when women's lives were defined by their male connections, she had more of those connections, across a wider political spectrum, than virtually any other documented Irish woman of her century.

The task of compiling a portrait of a medieval Celtic woman, such as Gormflaith illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of medieval source material. The evidence is strongest when multiple source types corroborate one another, and weakest when relying on literary or retrospective texts that blend history with possible artificial and supplanted narratives or mythological literary devices.

³¹ Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, 'Tales of Three Gormlaiths in Medieval Irish Literature', *Ériu*, 52 (2002), pp 6-18.

Having to disseminate historical fact from literary tools is unfortunately common among medieval representations of women. Nonetheless, after careful analysis, what remains is not the femme fatale of the saga tradition but a powerful woman of exceptional dynastic position who navigated one of the most turbulent political landscapes in early medieval Europe and whose marriages shaped alliances and conflicts across two cultural worlds. Her memory proved so disturbing to later writers that they could not resist remaking her into myth.

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