

GYBURC AND HERZELOYDE: WOLFRAM'S REMARKABLE WOMEN

by

JULIE L. ROWE

(Under the Direction of Alexander Sager)

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to examine two of Wolfram von Eschenbach's female characters: Herzeloide from his work *Parzival* and Gyburc of his subsequent epic *Willehalm*. This paper focuses on these figures primarily by contrasting them to the characters from which they were derived, namely, Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval: the Story of the Grail* and the anonymous French epic poem *The Song of Aliscans*. It is my intention to investigate Wolfram's dual representation of women; he both exalts them and undermines their potential to establish independence. As women of medieval literary works are often strong enough to initially disrupt and challenge the patriarchal structure, they are ultimately forced to resign to it, relegated back to their conventional gender roles. Wolfram, however, ultimately devises one female character who contradicts this paradigm and transcends her subservient role as a woman, placing herself as an equal to her male counterparts.

INDEX WORDS: Wolfram von Eschenbach, Chrétien de Troyes, Parzival, Perceval, Aliscans, Willehalm, Gyburc, Guibourc, Herzeloide, representation of women

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DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to my mother Jan, my father Bill, my Aunt Linda and my Uncle Ken. Their incredible support, steadfast encouragement and unconditional love are what have made it possible for me to attain my Master's Degree. I would also like to thank each and every one of my other family members and friends for their love, support and encouragement throughout my academic career. I will never be able to fully express my gratitude to all of you and I love you with all my heart. Ultimately I give thanks to God, who makes all things possible. Hey everyone—I made it!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The thirteenth-century German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach developed the female characters of his narratives far beyond their original literary sources. He endowed them with a greater psychological, intellectual, spiritual depth and complexity. This study will examine two of Wolfram's most important and characteristic female figures in detail, Herzelayde in his first work, the Grail-romance *Parzival* and Gyburc of his late epic *Willehalm*. My primary material for this study will be a detailed comparison with Wolfram's sources: Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval: the Story of the Grail* and the anonymous French epic poem *The Song of Aliscans*.

Wolfram scholars have long noted a particular polarity in Wolfram's representation of women. He exalts their roles in courtly society but, at the same time, undermines their potential to establish independence. This is most often the case in the political sphere. As Christopher Young has pointed out: "When women are left in sole charge, they are besieged and on the point of being overrun until a male hero arrives to save them" (258). In *Parzival*, many women are strong enough to initially disrupt and challenge the patriarchal structure. But they are ultimately only permitted to do so within the larger structural confines of the male-dominated system. In the end, they are no match for the power of masculine society. Eventually, equilibrium is brought back to the disrupted hierarchy: "gender roles are swiftly and definitively realigned to conform with the rules of patriarchy."¹

The first part of my thesis focuses on Herzelayde. I show that while she conforms to the

¹ Young, p. 263.

above-mentioned paradigm, her attempt to disrupt and break with patriarchal society is far more radical than any other female figure in *Parzival*, and it is precisely here where Wolfram is most innovative with her figure with respect to its source. Out of Chrétien's static, stereotypical mother-figure, Wolfram has constructed one of his narrative's most compelling and problematic characters.

The second part of this study deals with a character who, I claim, defies the paradigm discussed by Young. In *Willehalm's* Gyburc, Wolfram contradicts this pre-governed, cyclical pattern of feminine inferiority, creating a literary figure who has the ability to overcome conventional feminine weakness through the assertion of a new and profound inner strength. Wolfram breaks the pattern with Gyburc, and she alone emerges as a woman whose strength and independence is unfaltering, and whose profound spirituality transcends the patriarchal hierarchy.

CHAPTER 2

HERZELOYDE

Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval: The Story of the Grail* (ca. 1185) opens with a description of how the story's hero, living in forest solitude with his mother and a small retinue, encounters a group of knights while on a hunting ride. Having never seen nor heard of knights before, he is fascinated, and in response to his questions, the knights direct him to the court of the "king who makes men knights."² Upon learning of her son's discovery, the boy's mother is deeply disturbed; she, who has nothing left but her son, had been attempting to keep him from learning about knights and chivalry. The boy insists on leaving, however, and after a few feeble efforts to hold him back, the mother eventually gives in and lets him depart. As he is riding away, she collapses in a faint.

This is the figure out of whom Wolfram created Herzeloide in his work *Parzival* (ca. 1200-1210). But there is a great deal more to Herzeloide than to Chrétien's mother-figure. This chapter discusses what I consider to be Wolfram's central innovations: the way in which the figure is introduced in each text; two crucial scenes, the episodes of the fool's clothing and the songbirds; and the personal involvement and investment of the narrator himself in his character.

Perhaps the most telling initial difference between Chrétien's and Wolfram's mother figures is the way in which they are identified in each work. In *Perceval*, the mother figure remains nameless throughout the text. In *Parzival*, however, Wolfram identifies her with the name of "Herzeloide." Chrétien introduces Perceval's mother as simply "the widowed lady of

² *Perceval*, p. 5. All English citations of *Perceval* are taken from Nigel Bryant's translation and will be parenthetically noted from this point forward.

the wild and lonely forest” (2). Apart from the occasional identification as “my lady,” she is repeatedly referenced in this same generalized, nameless manner, most often simply as “mother.”³ This shows us that in the French text, Perceval’s mother is only significant in terms of her relationship to the story’s protagonist. Her individual identity, her “name,” is of no importance. Chrétien does not single her out as having any extraordinary character attributes, but only sets forth that she is of good moral character, and occupies the role of faithful and loving mother to Perceval. She is a somewhat static figure, limited to the stereotypical role of the “good mother.”

Wolfram drastically alters the significance of this figure in *Parzival*, giving her a far greater role in the text and stronger presence than she possesses in Chrétien. He not only supplies her with a name, “Herzeloyde,” and an individual identity, but also many individualized and dynamic qualities not found in Chrétien. In her study of Wolfram’s female characters, *Wîplîches Wîbes Reht*, Marion Gibbs surmises that Wolfram, for whom the idea of heredity is profoundly important, found it “[inconceivable] that his most noble hero should be the son of any but a truly noble woman” (3).

Wolfram considered the hero’s mother a figure of such importance that he invented a whole biography for her (as well as for Parzival’s father, Gahmuret) completely independent of anything found in Chrétien.⁴ Book I and II of *Parzival* tell the story of Herzeloyde and Gahmuret before Parzival was born—that is, before the scene of forest isolation that opens Chrétien’s tale. Book II, where Herzeloyde first appears, opens with Gahmuret’s arrival in Waleis, in which he learns of a tournament that has been proclaimed by the queen. Although she

³ For example: “[Perceval] would go and see his mother’s harrowers” (p. 2); “By my soul, my lady my mother’s words were true . . .” (p. 2); “. . . and his mother then would lose her mind. . .” (p. 5).

⁴ No sources have been found for the first two books of *Parzival*. See the discussion in Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, p. 161.

is not yet identified with a name, we are made aware of her worth, for the winner of this tournament will take home nothing less than two countries and the maiden queen herself. As Gahmuret fights valiantly in the *vesperîe*, the competitive games that precede the tournament, the queen sets her eyes on him and determines that his fighting has already earned him the “hoesten prîs” (82, 4: “highest prize”⁵), her. She desires to meet him, and after they exchange greetings, she shows her profound affection for Gahmuret when she takes hold of him and seats him right next to her. His proximity to Herzeloide is significant because it is not an honor held by just anyone; she *allows* him to sit so near to her (48). She is so important that Wolfram deems it appropriate to introduce her directly to the reader: “welt ir nu hoeren wie si hiez? / diu künigin Herzeloide” (84, 8-9: “Would you like now to hear what her name was? She was Queen Herzeloide” [48]).

Although the official tournament proclaimed by the queen has been cancelled due to the fatigue of the knights caused by the *vesperîe*, Herzeloide is intent on having Gahmuret as her husband and makes a claim upon him. When Gahmuret refuses her demand on account of the heathen wife he has left behind, she uses whatever tools she can find to legally enact her claim on him and quickly points out that the sacrament of baptism, which has “superior power,” invalidates his current marriage.⁶ Her tenacious pursuit of Gahmuret ultimately results in a verdict being handed down in her favor, allowing her to claim him as her husband. Despite the aggressive and calculating manner in which she “wins” Gahmuret, however, Wolfram reminds us that Herzeloide is an exceedingly good and admirable person: “si kêrte ir herze an guote kunst: / [. . .] ir kiusche was vür prîs erkant” (103, 1; 5: “her heart was turned to the knowledge

⁵ *Parzival*, p. 47. All English citations of *Parzival* are taken from Helen Mustard and Charles Passage's translation and will be parenthetically noted from this point forward.

⁶ Mustard and Passage point out in a footnote “Wolfram’s audience would readily accede to the notion that marriage between a Christian and a heathen had no validity” (p. 53).

of the good / [. . .] her virtue was declared most admirable” [58]). With the close of Book II, we are left with quite an introduction of Herzeloide; she is powerful, virtuous, beautiful and sly.

In Chrétien’s tale, the widow motif is secondary to the focus placed on Perceval in his quest to discover knighthood. We get the impression that a good deal of time has passed since Perceval’s father has died, and that Perceval’s mother is no longer immediately mourning his loss. She expresses no grief until well into the chapter when she tells her son that she “has suffered a bitter life since his death” (6). Even then, she talks of her grief as if it were a thing of the past, explaining in the past tense: “You were all my consolation then, and all that I possessed, for nothing else remained to me. God had left me nothing more to give me joy and happiness” (6). Wolfram, in comparison, emphasizes the importance of Herzeloide’s grief by opening Book III with a long narratorial commentary about it. She is so grieved at the death of her husband that nothing is able to console her: “ein nebel was ir diu sunne: / si vlôch der werlde wunne. / ir was gelîch naht unt der tac: / ir herze niht wan jâmers pflac.” (117, 3-6: “for her the sun was a mist. She fled the world’s delight. To her night and day were the same; her heart dwelt on sorrow alone” [66]). The grief motif sets up Herzeloide as a character under the influence of powerful emotions who is willing to go to drastic lengths to do what she feels is right, which is to keep her son from knighthood and thus from the patriarchal system that is responsible for her husband’s death.

Herzeloide’s character is in greatest contrast to that of Perceval’s mother in her efforts to prevent her son from becoming a knight. In her attempt to do so, she exhibits a crafty and cunning intelligence only hinted at in Chrétien’s maternal figure. First of all, although Perceval’s mother wishes to prevent her son from seeking knighthood, we have no evidence that her isolated forest existence is part of her plan to accomplish this. Rather, Perceval’s father was

the one who moved the family to the wilderness after the death of his sons (6). Herzeloyde, in contrast, brings her son to live in the forest for the sole purpose of secluding him from the rest of the world. Her rightful place as Queen is in her kingdom, but she abandons society in order to remove her son from knighthood, which she considers a threat: “Sich zôch diu vrouwe jâmers balt / ûz ir lande in einen walt, [. . .] / niht durch bluomen ûf die plâne. [. . .] / si brâhte dar durch vlühtesal / des werden Gahmuretes kint.” (117, 7-8; 10; 14-14: “this lady full of sorrow withdrew from her kingdom to a forest [. . .] and not for the sake of flowers on the meadow [. . .] And there, for refuge, she brought noble Gahmuret’s child” [67]). It is significant that in her decision to “protect” him, the narrator comments that she has simultaneously robbed him of his rightly upbringing: “der knappe alsus verborgen wart / zer waste in Soltâne erzogen / an küneclîcher vuore betrogen” (117, 30; 118, 1-2: “The boy thus hidden away was brought up in the forest clearing of Soltane, cheated of his royal heritage” [67]). Since there is no indication in the text that Chrétien’s mother has likewise robbed her son of any special heritage, this predicament is unique to the German text.

In Chrétien, the mother, with the help of her harrowers, tries her best to keep her son away from any semblance of knighthood. When Perceval and the knights approach the workers, they all tremble with fear, but primarily because of Perceval himself, and secondarily because of his mother: “[. . .] for they knew very well that if the knights told him of their life and ways, then he would want to be a knight; and his mother then would lose her mind, for they had been trying to keep him from ever seeing knights or learning anything of their business” (5). Not simply the mother, but the whole community aspires to keep Perceval from knighthood, and they collectively work together toward the same goal.

There is a difference in how Herzeloide accomplishes this same task in Wolfram's version. Herzeloide does whatever she deems necessary for the protection of her son, to the point that she orders her people not to breathe a word about knights to him: "es waere man oder wîp, / den gebôt si allen an den lîp, / daz si immer ritters wurden lût" (117, 21-23: "she summoned her people before her and charged them on their lives, men and women alike, never to utter a word about knights" [67]), and then pointedly says to them "nu habt iuch an der witze craft, / und helt in alle ritterschaft" (117, 27-28: "now use your wits and keep all knighthood from him" [67]). Through these actions, Herzeloide reveals her domination and capacity for power, which she uses to threaten her people with no less than their lives should they disobey her. When Parzival returns home after his encounter with the knights, the harrowers are overwhelmed with fear, their thoughts turning immediately to the wrath of the Queen: "wir sulen der kûneginne haz / von schulden hoeren umbe daz" (125, 23-24: "we will hear the queen's hatred for this" [71]). In contrast, the relationship between the mother and the workers in *Perceval* is not based on threats and fear; rather, the workers act out of compassion. The mother does not threaten the harrowers, and we have the distinct impression that the harrowers even share her concern about the boy. Chrétien's mother does not exhibit attitudes of domination or aggression, seeking only, through the help and mutual concern of her harrowers, to avoid contact with knights. Wolfram has thus transformed the melancholy, somewhat static and passive mother figure in *Perceval*, who makes no great effort to keep her son from pursuing his goal to become a knight, into an obsessive mother intent upon keeping her son from realizing his dangerous desire to follow in the footsteps of his father.

Another key episode in Wolfram's revision is the scene in which the hero's mother has him dressed for his journey to king Arthur's court. In Chrétien, Perceval and his mother are

Welsh, and his mother accordingly dresses him in Welsh clothing: “a great canvas shirt, and breeches made in the Welsh fashion” and “a hooded tunic of deer-hide, stitched tight all around” (6). According to the knights Perceval has met in the woods, the Welsh are “by nature more stupid than the beasts in pasture” (4), but there is no indication that Perceval’s mother dresses him in the Welsh fashion with the intention of making him look stupid. It is true that she engages in “ploys” to delay him: “she held him back for three days, no more; after that all her ploys were vain” (6). But the only “ploy” seems to be the delay itself, not the clothing he is wearing. At most, any connection between Perceval’s clothing and his mother’s desire to prevent his journey must be inferred. The mother quickly gives in and accepts her son’s wishes, albeit with great sorrow, and bids him farewell: “go to the king’s court and tell him to give you arms” (6). In her resignation, she accepts her son’s will and places God, not herself, in the position of the decision-maker of his future: “You will soon be a knight, my son, I do believe, if it please God” (7). In an act of love for her son, she is both gracious and resigned.

Herzeloide, in comparison, is exceptionally cunning and calculating in her quest to keep her son by her side, for when Parzival tells her that he will indeed seek chivalric service with King Arthur, her thoughts turn immediately to plotting: “diu vrouwe enwesse rehte, wie / daz si ir den list erdaehte / unde in von dem willen braehte” (126, 16-18: “The lady did not rightly know what stratagem to invent to keep him from his purpose” [71]). When her son begs her for a horse, she slyly grants him one in an apparent act of support, but all the while setting him up to fail: “ichn wil im niht versagen: / ez muoz aber vil boese sîn” (126, 22-23: “I will not deny him [. . .] but it must be a thoroughly bad one” [71]). She then states explicitly that she will dress him in fool’s clothing in the hopes that he might be “pommeled and beaten” such that he returns to her:

“der liute vil bî spotte sint.
 tôren kleider sol mîn kint
 ob sîme liechten lîbe tragn.
 wirt er geroufet unt geslagn,
 sô kumt er mir her wider wol.” (126, 25-29)

(“People are much given to mockery. Fool’s clothing shall my child wear on his fair body. If he is pommelled and beaten, perhaps he will come back to me again.”) [71]

Herzeloyde is thus represented as far more determined than her French counterpart in preventing her son from leaving, and she does not succumb to acceptance as easily as Chrétien’s mother does, for not only does her grief consume her, but her intense emotions are precisely what drive her to act. In her single-minded obsession, she accepts the fact that her plot threatens her son’s safety, who may be physically assaulted because of her ploy. For her, any harm he may come to by being beaten is far less than he would suffer in the perilous profession of knighthood. Fighting until the bitter end, Herzeloyde refuses to renounce her wishes to keep him there and even begs Parzival to stay, running after him as he rides away. This is in stark contrast to Chrétien’s mother, who exhibits far more rational and emotionally stable behavior. Although it causes her great pain, she selflessly accepts her son’s decision in the interest of his happiness and, by doing so, assumes the role of a stereotypical, idealized mother. Herzeloyde, on the other hand, exhibits self-centered emotions, placing her own needs above her son’s desires.

The irrational side of Herzeloyde’s character is best seen in another episode that, like her biographical pre-history in Book II, represents a wholesale invention of the German poet vis-à-vis his source. Wolfram ascribes to his protagonist an altogether more intense reaction to the songs of the birds than the simple “joy” felt by Perceval. Parzival, rather, feels an intense mixture of pleasure and pain that sends him bawling to his mother:

erne kunde niht gesorgen,
 ez enwære ob im der vogelsanc,

die süeze in sîn herze dranc:
 daz erstracte im sîniu brüstelîn.
 al weinde er lief zer kûnegîn. (118, 14-18)

(Of sorrow he knew nothing, unless it was the birdsong above him, for the sweetness of it pierced his heart and made his little bosom swell. Weeping he ran to the queen.) [67]

Herzeloyde, mystified by her son's reaction to the birds, spends a great deal of time trying to get to the bottom of it:

dem mære gienc si lange nâch.
 eins tages si in kapfen sach
 ûf die boume nâch der vogeleschal.
 si wart wol innen daz zeswal
 von der stimme ir Kindesbrust.
 des twang in art und sîn gelust.
 frou Herzeloyde kêrt ir haz
 an die vogeleschal, sine wesse um waz:
 si wolt ir schal verkrenken.
 ir bûliute unde ir enken
 die hiez si vaste gâhen,
 vogeles wûrgn und vâhen. (118, 23-30; 119, 1-4)

(For a long time she kept pursuing the matter. One day she saw him gaping up at the trees toward the song of the birds, and then she realized it was their voices that made her child's bosom swell. His heritage and his desire thus compelled him. Without quite knowing why, Lady Herzeloyde turned her anger against the birds and wanted to destroy their song. She bade her plowmen and her field hands to make haste to snare the birds and twist their necks.) [67]

This "heritage and desire" that Herzeloyde sees in her son has a direct connection to Gahmuret, Parzival's deceased father. For Gahmuret, pursuing the life of a knight was the core of his very being, something expressed early in the story. In Book I, Gahmuret tells his brother that he must leave his hometown and venture out because he feels a strong desire, *gelust*, to do so: "mîn herze iedoch nâch hœhe strebet: / ine weiz war umbez alsus lebet, / daz mir swillet sus mîn winster Brust. / ôwê war jaget mich mîn gelust?" (9, 23-26: "My heart, however, yearns upward

to the heights. I do not know why it is so full of life that the left side of my breast swells to bursting. O where is my desire driving me?” [7]).

This *gelust* of Gahmuret’s is so strong, he feels compelled to issue Herzeloyde a warning when she “wins him” in Book II. He cautions her that should she try to prevent him from venturing out for the purpose of fighting, he will leave her:

“lât ir niht turnieren mich,
sô kan ich noch den alten slich,
als dô ich mînem wîbe entran,
die ich ouch mit ritterschaft gewan.
dô si mich ûf von strîte bant,
ich liez ir liute unde lant.” (96, 29-30; 97, 1-4)

(“If you do not allow me to go jousting, I still know the old trick that I used when I left my wife —whom I also won through feats of knighthood. When she applied the checkrein to keep me from battle, I forsook a people and a country.”) [55]

Herzeloyde sees the manifestation of Gahmuret in her son. As Parzival “gapes up” (67) at the birds in the trees, she senses that he senses the same feeling that made his father’s heart “yearn upward” (7). Since the birds elicit this Gahmuret-like *gelust* (118, 28) in Parzival, Herzeloyde wishes to eradicate them, thereby destroying the very thing that she instinctively believes will lead to his premature death. She is consumed by “anger”—the Middle High German word is *haz*, an emotional state between hatred and anger—that drives her to an act of violence, which she has carried out by her field hands who twist the necks of the birds. This illustrates that she is a power with which to be reckoned. Furthermore, Wolfram shows Herzeloyde to be a deeply psychological character by ascribing a subconscious motive to her actions; she herself does “not know why” (118, 30) she undertakes to kill Parzival’s birds. She is susceptible to irrational thought, for she acts on her anger despite the fact that she herself cannot fully explain her reasons for doing so. Such acts of irrationality and aggressiveness are completely absent from the mother figure in Perceval.

Nonetheless, despite Herzeloide's problematic actions, Wolfram once again reminds the reader of her purity as a mother in the way in which she quickly responds to Parzival's appeal that the birds should not be harmed; her uncontrolled behavior is thus motivated purely out of love, as described by Gibbs who states that "such brutal disregard for life is not in the nature of this gentle woman" (19). However, although Gibbs points out Herzeloide's propensity for gentleness, she remains an ambivalent figure. Within her complexity lies a degree of unpredictability.

Although the mother figure in *Perceval* is clearly an upright moral character, the narrator himself does not personally comment upon her. Beyond simple narrative description, all we learn of her is from the perspective of her son. She is not singled out with exceptional qualities as an individual woman, but confined within the boundaries of her role of a good, simple and predictable mother. She serves more in a representative than individual role. Wolfram, in contrast, adds not only a detailed biography, but a whole stratum of narrator commentary on Herzeloide's character. He personally emphasizes her significance by boldly praising and elevating her throughout the work in her capacity as woman and mother. He highlights her physical beauty in metaphors of brilliant light "vrou Herzeloide gap den schîn, / waern erloschen gar die kerzen sîn, / dâ waer doch licht von ir genuoc" (84, 13-15: "From the lady Herzeloide was shed such radiance that, if all the candles had been extinguished, there would from her alone have been sufficient light" [48]). It is noteworthy that, before Herzeloide becomes a mother, she is elevated in her role as a woman and, moreover, as a queen who is both respected and honored:

diu was als diu sunne lieht
und hete minneclîchen lîp.
rîcheit bî jungent pflac daz wîp,
und vröuden mêre dan ze vil:
si was gar ob dem wunsches zil.
si kêrte ir herze an guote kunst:

das bejagte si der werlde gunst.
 vrou Herzeloyd diu künegin,
 ir site an lobe vant gewin,
 ir kiusche was vür prîs erkant. (102, 26-30 - 103, 1-5)

(She was like the sunlight and made for love. Wealth and virtue that woman had, and of joys more than too much for she had surpassed the limits of desire. Her heart was turned to the knowledge of the good, and hence she won the favor of the world. The life of Lady Herzeloyde the Queen won praise, and her virtue was declared most admirable.) [58]

In Book III, she is referred to as “vrou Herzeloyd diu rîche” (116, 28: “Lady Herzeloyde, the mighty” [66]) and we read that “der valsch sô gar an ir verswant, / ouge noch ôre in nie dâ vant.” (117, 1-2: “falsity had so utterly vanished from her heart that neither eye nor ear could detect it” [66]). She is “ein wurzel der gûte und ein stam der diemüete” (128, 27-28: “a root of goodness she, and a branch of humility” [72]). It is clear that Herzeloyde is of the highest moral fiber, for she flees steadfastly from any conduct that is not becoming of a woman.

Wolfram portrays and comments upon Herzeloyde as a problematic figure. On one hand she is a lovely, virtuous woman who is worthy of the highest praise, on the other hand, she is a cunning, crafty woman who uses her powers to get what she wants. But no matter how obsessive or irrational she may act, Wolfram simultaneously emphasizes her inherent goodness, so that we can understand that Herzeloyde’s actions are based out of love and a strong desire to protect her son from following the same path in life that her husband did. Wolfram thus rationalizes her behavior and provides an explanation for why Herzeloyde challenges and disrupts the patriarchy. By controlling her portrayal in this manner, Wolfram is able to affect the way we think about her. When she begins to appear “bad,” Wolfram suddenly justifies her by illuminating her goodness. Her complexity requires explanation, and this dynamic is what makes her so interesting and compelling.

Herzeloyde’s passionate nature is epitomized by her dramatic death, for as soon as

Parzival has ridden away from her sight, “dô viel diu vrouwe valsches laz / ûf die erde, aldâ si jâmer sneit / sô daz si ein sterben niht vermeit” (128, 21-23: “that lady without falsity fell upon the ground, where grief stabbed her until she died” [72]). Her death illustrates how she is ultimately overcome by the patriarchy she has tried so desperately to disrupt. Nonetheless, Wolfram takes the opportunity to draw final attention to Herzelayde’s inherent goodness, which has earned her great heavenly honor: “ir vil getriulicher tôt / der vrouwen wert die hellenôt. / ôwol si daz si ie muoter wart!” (128, 23-25: “Her death from sheer loyalty saved her from the pains of hell. Well for her that she became a mother!” [72]). He makes a final justification of her actions, which are so profound that they have saved her from eternal damnation. Such continuous, explicit praise is not offered to Perceval’s mother, although she was a good and honorable mother. Chrétien’s mother simply faints from sorrow as her son rides away, and it is not until the next chapter that Perceval’s cousin informs him that she eventually died of grief on his account (39).

Herzelayde disrupts and challenges the patriarchal system in her attempts to control her son’s destiny by isolating him in the forest, dressing him in fool’s clothing, and trying to eradicate the birds. She wishes to alter the course of her son’s life by preventing him from becoming a knight, a normal course of action in the life of a young male. All of these actions, though motivated out of love and aimed at protecting her son, ultimately threaten his welfare and rob him of his rightful upbringing. By so protecting him, she is attempting to break this “normal” masculine life cycle by forcing it to take a new direction. However, no matter how hard she tries, her attempts are in vain, and she finds that she must submit to the dominating masculine hierarchy; this resignation is epitomized by her death.

CHAPTER 3

GYBURC

Wolfram builds his most dynamic female character in his subsequent work, *Willehalm* (ca. 1212-1217). It is Gyburc, the brave and loving companion of Willeham, who is the outstanding female character. Once again, although Wolfram maintains some of the basic attributes of Gyburc's source character, he assigns her many unique new aspects. Like Herzeloide, she is personalized and highly individualized. In creating her, Wolfram introduces a new and ideal concept of womanhood. Although Gyburc embodies all of the traditional feminine qualities of beauty, virtue and honor, she is also accorded great mental and physical strength. Moreover, she exhibits a pronounced intelligence and embodies exceeding grace and mercy, all of which single her out as a unique and exceptional female character of medieval literature. Gibbs offers an impressive description of her by asserting that "she is indeed Wolfram's most complete demonstration of his ideal, womanhood realized to its utmost limits, and his presentation of her is consequently different from that of his other heroines, in some ways an intensification of it, in other ways a departure from it, in accordance with her essentially active rôle" (74). Gyburc is very different from all of her female counterparts: when she challenges and disrupts the governing patriarchal structure, she is not subsequently relegated back down to her "rightful" role as a woman; she transcends it.

The Song of Aliscans (ca. 1185), a French *chanson de geste* in the cycle of William of Orange (a figure based on the historical Count William of Toulouse), tells how a heathen army,

the Saracens, are engaged in battle with William and his Christian army. When William's nephew Vivien is killed in action, he is sorely aggrieved, and seeks to return to Orange. On his way, however, he is attacked once again by a group of heathens, and ends up donning the armor of one of the defeated Saracens. He makes his way back to Orange, and to his beloved wife Guibourc, who has forsaken her Saracen heritage, converted to Christianity and married William. As William approaches the fortress, Guibourc does not recognize him because of his attire, thinking him a Saracen enemy. After William successfully identifies himself, she lets him in and they assess their tactical position in the war. In need of additional fighting forces, Guibourc sends William off to the French court to ask the king for help. Meanwhile, she and her maidens don armor and vow to protect Orange from the Saracen army in William's absence. William and his new forces return and ultimately defeat the Saracens.

Guibourc is the figure from whom Wolfram created Gyburc. He transforms her from the important but secondary figure of his source into the central character in *Willehalm*. He fundamentally alters both the way in which she is introduced in the work, as well as many aspects of her character. He amplifies her "masculinization," highlighting her role as liberator of her husband, and her brave, intelligent and confident defense of Orange. In other ways, his portrait of her is completely new, above all in her profound and active spirituality, in which she promotes Christianity, fights for its preservation, and places God above all, such that she is designated a holy figure. Finally, I argue that, unlike Herzeloyde, she not only challenges and disrupts the patriarchy, she ultimately becomes an autonomous part of it; no longer subservient to it.

The first way in which Gyburc is singled out as an important figure involves the way Wolfram modifies her introduction in the text. In *Aliscans*, Guibourc is not actually introduced.

She is first mentioned by Vivien, who cries out in battle “Guibourc, my lady, you’ll not see me again!” (6, 125). When she is mentioned a second time, it is by William, who wishes to “see [his] good Guibourc again” (18, 554), refers to her as his “dear Guibourc” (20, 595), and exclaims, “Alas, Guibourc, my Countess fine and true!” (25, 755). The repeated mention of her name highlights her significance in the story before she is actually physically present. Oddly enough, however, her role cannot be concretely identified through the ambiguous descriptions of “my lady,” “good,” “dear,” and “my Countess.” These terms, despite their speaker, fail to identify Guibourc as William’s wife, which is undoubtedly her most significant role in the work. The reader is meanwhile told that Count William’s wife bears the name of “Orable.” William has shamed the great heathen king, Tiebaut, by stealing and wedding her (9, 238-239). This Orable is not clearly identified as Guibourc until William cries out: “Ah! Guibourc, wife” (26, 773).

The French audience, familiar with the other tales in the William cycle, would have known that Orable and Guibourc were one in same. Heathen women who converted to Christianity conventionally adopted new names. For an audience unfamiliar with the French epic tradition, however, the lack of explanation for this nominal duality would have been puzzling. Wolfram’s German audience faced such a predicament; until *Willehalm*, none of the epic cycle of William of Orange was known in Germany.⁷ It was therefore necessary that Gyburc be introduced in a more direct way than in the French source. However, Wolfram goes considerably beyond this simple logistical requirement.

Wolfram’s treatment of Gyburc, like that of Herzeloyde, involves a far more intimate introduction. He offers immediate insight into her character, as well as her purpose in the story.

⁷ Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, pp. 235-236.

Wolfram not only introduces her in Book I of the narrative, but employs her alternate name, Arabeln, which is immediately explained: “Arabeln Willalm erwarp, / dar umbe unschuldic volc erstarp. / diu minne im leiste und ê gehiez, / Gyburc si sich toufen liez.” (7, 27-30: “Willehalm won the love of Arabel, and because of this innocent people died. She who gave him her love and pledged herself to him in marriage was baptized and took the name of Giburc”⁸). Here, Wolfram emphasizes Gyburc’s permanent conversion to her chosen faith through identification of a new Christian name, boldly illustrating how she has purged herself of her former ancestry. The separation between heathen and Christian is a paramount theme of the work and the core of Gyburc’s existence.

Wolfram then provides an historical account of her past, explaining that her previous husband, the heathen king Tybalt, sorely lamented her loss and sought revenge on Willehalm in an attempt to recapture her. Such a thorough introduction of Gyburc elicits special attention from the reader, who well understands that Gyburc is solely responsible for all of the fighting in which William and his men are involved. Her marriage and conversion have caused a war to erupt between the heathens and the Christians: “Durh Gyburge al diu nôt geschach” (306, 1: “Giburc was the cause of all this misery” [155]). Wolfram thus alerts us that she is a highly valued woman and occupies a central position in the work.

In contrast, no such historical account is offered for Guibourc in *Aliscans*, though other parts of the William cycle explained her origins. Moreover, there is no mention that she is the catalyst of the religious war. From the second line of the poem it is clear that an “awful war on Aliscans was waged” (1, 2); however, no reason for the war is offered. The poem begins immediately with intense and lengthy descriptions of fighting. To be sure, repeated references to

⁸ *Willehalm*, p. 21. All English citations of *Willehalm* are taken from Marion Gibbs's and Sidney Johnson's translation, unless otherwise noted, and will be parenthetically noted from this point forward.

the hatred directed to the Christians by the heathens signal that this battle is a religious conflict. Thus, since no alternative reason is given, we assume that religion is its cause. It is made clear that Guibourc has brought great shame to her previous husband and race. The heathen Aerofles threatens William, telling him that he shall not escape back to Orange, “back to that hated whore who is your wife, who shamed Tiebaut my nephew and all his line because of you” (35). Gyburc herself, however, is not the cause of the war. As Martin Jones points out, “[Wolfram’s] focus of Giburc as the object of Saracen interest from the outset contrasts with *Aliscans*, where the intention first declared is to capture Guillaume.”⁹ In *Aliscans*, Guibourc is only a secondary factor contributing to the war; religion is the primary cause. A concrete reason for the heathens’ pursuit of William is finally given in an encounter between William and Aerofles, in which William pleads with him to reveal why he is hated so much by the heathen tribe. He tells Aerofles that he is prepared, in good faith, to make up for any wrongs he has committed toward him. Aerofles’s reply is explicitly centered upon religion, not Guibourc:

Says Aerofles: “I am greatly displeased
That Paynim lands should trust your Trinity,
Your Baptism and Christianity,
And think that Jesus has any power to wield;
But if you now admit what I believe:
That in the Virgin’s womb no God was reared,
I’ll let you go quite safe and sound from here
Back to Orange, that admirable seat,
Which Deramed my brother shall retrieve;
To King Tiebaut the Slav your wife I’ll leave;
In such a way may our accord be sealed;
No other way can our quarrel be healed.” (37, 1190-1201)

The return of Guibourc is an accompanying provision to complete the deal. William’s reply to Aerofles’s challenge is noteworthy. He does not even mention Guibourc, but replies: “I’d rather have the head cut clean off me / And have my body dismembered piece by piece, / Before I’ll

⁹ Jones, p. 100. Note that *Guillaume* is the French spelling of *William*.

quit the King of Majesty!” (37, 1204-1206). This remark highlights the broad theme of religious conflict, and is in contrast to how Wolfram makes Gyburc the cause of the war in *Willehalm*. From the beginning of *Willehalm*, Wolfram singles out and focuses on Gyburc. Since it is clear that all the Christians are fighting because of her and in her defense, she exhibits far more textual status and significance as a character than *Aliscans*’s Guibourc.

Another of Wolfram’s central innovations in the representation of Gyburc is her “masculinization” and the way Wolfram juxtaposes her gender roles. First and foremost, Wolfram assigns Gyburc the position of liberator. Before Willehalm meets Gyburc, he has been captured and imprisoned by the enemy forces of King Sinagun, and during this captivity he falls in love with her. In a conversation she has with her father, Gyburc tells him that she is the sole reason for his escape: “sus lônde ich sîner arbeit: / von boin und anderem sîm versmidn / macht ich in ledec an allen lidn, / unt fuor in toufpaeriu lant.” (220, 26-29: “I rewarded him for all his troubles by freeing him from the fetters and other irons that bound him hand and foot and by going with him to Christian lands” [116]). In an ironic reversal, Willehalm functions as the “damsel in distress,” with Gyburc as the heroic liberator, a role traditionally reserved for the male. Incidentally, this role of liberator is not unique; Wolfram retains this characteristic from Guibourc, and although this information is not present in *Aliscans*, it is contained within another tale of the *Guillaume* cycle, namely that of *Prise d’Orange*. By Wolfram’s inclusion of this information, as in the case of the nominal duality, he offers his audiences insight into how Gyburc and Willehalm met. However, he goes beyond his French source in having his Gyburc speak in a self-conscious manner about her own role as liberator of Willehalm, as highlighted above in her conversation with her father. More importantly, it is likely that Wolfram felt compelled to maintain her role as liberator in order to assert her masculine attributes.

Gyburc's quasi-masculine bravery and fighting ability is central to Wolfram's gender juxtaposition. Wolfram does not invent this feature, he adopts it from his source. However, he emphasizes it far more than in *Aliscans*. Guibourc asserts her courageous nature when she, amid tears, sends William off to battle, reassuring him that she and her ladies will don armor and "guard the walls of [his] castle-keep / And hold them well against assault or siege!" (55: 1956-57). She breaks from a typical female role when she further declares how she will fight if so warranted: "I shall be armed as fits a warrior fierce; [. . .] / No Saracen or Paynim shall there be / Struck by a stone which has been hurled by me, / Who'll not be forced to tumble from his steed!" (55, 1958-1962). As William makes his way back to Orange, the narrator points out that Guibourc and her ladies have indeed guarded Orange successfully: "A strong defense against those Moors they make— / Full many a stone those ladies lift and aim, / Which hit and crush full many a Moorish face" (84, 3983-3985). Two aspects are notable: first, it is not Guibourc alone who defends the castle. She acts with the other women to create the fighting force. Secondly, there are no subsequent passages that draw further attention to her fighting efforts. Moreover, although Guibourc in *Aliscans* vows to fight for Orange, she does so under a mask of fear, for she herself tells us that "[she] is afraid of the Infidel breed" (85: 4064).

In *Willehalm*, in contrast, Wolfram gives Gyburc a far more pronounced role in the fighting. He amplifies her activity and independence: "diu selbe dicke wâpen truoc." (215, 7: "she who often bore arms herself" [114]). When her father Terramer attacks Orange after Willehalm has left, many of Gyburc's knights lie dead on the battlefield. In retaliation, she props up her knights's corpses on the walls of the city in attempt to intimidate the heathen army by making it appear as though they are still alive (67). Although Terramer and his army use a plethora of siege weapons against Gyburc, they fail to intimidate her: "drîboc und mangel, /

ebenhoeh ûf siulen langen, / igel, katzen, pfetraere, / swie vil ieslîches waere / ûf Gyburge
 schaden geworht, daz het si doch ze mâze ervorht.” (111, 9-14: “many siege weapons were
 made to attack Giburc —catapults and other stone throwers, movable towers on tall stilts,
 battering-rams, protective structures, ballistas —all that frightened her little” [67]).

Her courageous efforts are so effective that they inspire fear in the enemy (120). She is both relentless and fearless in her defense of Orange and, although Terramer tries, he is unable to induce her to surrender. When the heathens return from a temporary withdrawal, they attack with full force; Gyburc, once again and without hesitation dons her armor and stands with her sword upraised, “as if she were looking for combat” (119). When Willehalm finally returns to Orange, Gyburc thinks him to be a heathen and immediately proceeds to scold him for coming so close to the castle without identifying himself; she boldly threatens to approach him in the stance of a fight (119). *Willehalm* abounds in references to Gyburc’s courage, and at one point the narrator points out that the tale of *Willehalm* indeed attributes many brave deeds to her (120). She never cowers in the face of danger, nor does she hesitate to don armor and fight if necessary.

The fighting ability that Wolfram assigns Gyburc is one of her most prominent masculine qualities and markedly distinguishes her from other female characters. As Joachim Bumke points out:

the motif of the fighting lady is conspicuously rare in courtly poetry. It plays an important role only in Wolfram’s *Willehalm*, where Marquise Gyburg and her ladies defend the city of Orange for weeks against the fury of a large pagan army [. . .] In other respects, as well, Gyburg transcended the narrow sphere of action usually drawn for women and proved herself in functions usually reserved for men. (*Courtly Culture*, 350)

Wolfram specifically states that Gyburc acts in “masculine” ways. This repeated reference to her “masculine” behavior sets her apart from her *Aliscans* counterpart. When Willehalm returns to Orange the first time, Wolfram details how Gyburc shrewdly assesses their tactical position in

the war: “manliche sprach daz wîp, / als ob si manlichen lîp / und mannes herze trüege.” (95, 3-5: “The woman spoke manfully, as if she were endowed with the body and heart of a man” [59]). When she prepares to fight the Saracen army, “manlich, ninder als ein wîp / Diu künegîn gebârte.” (226, 30; 227, 1: “[t]he Queen acted like a man, not at all like a woman” [119]). Wolfram even allows her to temporarily compromise her beauty in order to defend Orange. William notices her unkempt appearance when he returns to her, for “sine het ouch niht sô liechten schîn, / als dô er von ir schiet” (229, 20-21: “she did not have quite the fair appearance that she had when he had left her” [120]).

Such bold references to her “masculine” nature draw attention to “what was clearly an issue of importance for Wolfram,”¹⁰ and through his pointed use of *manlich* to describe her behavior, it is evident that he is not content to marginalize her propensity for masculinity.¹¹ Guibourc’s projection of herself in the image of a woman warrior might well be thought to merit the epithet “manful,” but as Jones points out, the French text eschews such qualification, and it is Wolfram alone who introduces it to describe his heroine (104).

Willehalm’s Gyburc displays a duality of femininity and masculinity that is unmatched in the more stable figure of Guibourc in *Aliscans*. Although Guibourc at times exhibits masculine qualities, they are mildly developed and quick to succumb to the feminine attributes that dominate her character. She defends Orange, but when she thinks the heathen army has come back for attack, she is weak, fragile and even expresses feelings of abandonment: “Ah, William, you’ve left me to my fate! [. . .] / How wrong of you to leave me in this place; / I know full well I’ll soon be in my grave!” (84, 4027-30). Thereafter, she faints from fear. Wolfram’s Gyburc,

¹⁰ See Jones, p.102.

¹¹ See Jones, p. 117.

however, remains fearless to her enemies at all times and displays no signs of concession or weakness when she is being attacked. She is equipped with an ability to act rationally and remain calm under intense physical and psychological pressure. And although she, too, faints when Willehalm returns, it is explicitly stated that she does so out of joy: “Gyburge, diu durh vreud erschrac, / daz si unversunnen vor in lac.” (228, 27-28: “Gyburc was so overcome with joy that she fell in a faint in front of everyone” [119]).

Yet Gyburc is not entirely masculinized. Rather, she retains the ability to morph back into her feminine role. When Willehalm returns from battle for the last time, she takes off her armor, washes off the dirt, and even instructs her ladies to go and prepare themselves such that they appear beautiful for all of the knights. She quickly and effortlessly transforms herself into a beauty, adorned in a gown and cloak of silk, which is left to hang open with the laces untied (128). Gyburc exhibits her gender duality as she goes from a fighting warrior to a radiant and desirable woman.

Although Gyburc possesses the capacity for manly behavior, however, she exhibits it only when she feels compelled, and not necessarily because she wants to, allowing her to maintain her femininity. As Jones points out, she does not intentionally aspire to usurp a masculine role:

Her incursion into the territory of war is no challenge to a gender distinction defined by the permissibility of military action; rather, it has been forced upon her by circumstance, is strictly temporary, and is swiftly reversed when she takes the earliest opportunity to remove her armour and the grime it has left on her in order to present herself in a thoroughly feminine fashion once more. (118)

This dynamic opposition of gender attributes is yet another way in which Wolfram transforms her vis-à-vis his source.

Gyburc continues to exhibit her *manlîch* attributes in the way she is intellectually gifted, especially militarily. She is able to assess crisis situations, devise tactics for problem solving, and ultimately to advise and support her husband during the war. While Gyburc possesses these abilities with full force, the same intellectual prowess is absent in her *Aliscans* counterpart. In Gyburc's defense of Orange, the narrator tells us that "ir wer mit liste erscheinde" (230, 5: "her defence was marked by clever tactics" [120]); namely, her ingenious plan to intimidate the heathen army by propping up the dead soldiers on the battlefield. Through these efforts, she "ruortez sô mit sinnen, / daz ez die ûzeren vorhten" (230, 8-9: "manipulated them so skillfully that it inspired fear in the enemy outside" [120]). This successful stratagem with the corpses has no counterpart in the surviving versions of *Aliscans*.¹²

Another way in which Gyburc displays astute tactical awareness involves the keys to the fortress. In order to guard against intruders, she alone holds keys in her possession, keenly aware of the dangers of a potential bribe:

diu was mit slôze alsô behuot,
ob iemen wolde wenken
dort inne unt überdenken
sîne triwe durch miete,
swelch vîent daz geriete,
dazz im vrumte niht ein hâr.
Gyburc für den selben vâr
der bürge slüzzel selbe truoc (229, 6-13)

(It was fastened so securely with locks that if someone inside should be tempted by an enemy to reconsider his loyalty for the sake of a bribe, it would not do him a bit of good. To guard against precisely such a danger, Gyburc herself kept the keys to the fortress. [120])

She is a woman who thinks ahead and considers consequences; she never acts impulsively. Her forethought regarding the keys is a detail not found in *Aliscans*. She is in control as defender of

¹² See Jones, p. 108.

the castle, and Gyburc's tactical moves to protect place her in a role traditionally occupied by a male.

Gyburc is exceptionally clever, cunning, and stops at virtually nothing to achieve her goals. In the same way Herzeloyde slyly plotted to prevent Parzival from leaving her, Gyburc, too, has a keen craftiness. In both works, the hero returns to Orange from fighting and hastily calls out for the gate to be opened, since the heathen army is still chasing them. However, he rouses suspicion because he is clothed in heathen armor. In *Aliscans*, Guibourc replies to his request:

“You'll not come in, my brave!
I am alone—not one man here remains
Except this porter and one cleric ordained,
With little children not yet ten years of age,
And all us women, whose hearts with sorrow ache
For husbands gone, we know not where, away” (48, 1622-27)

This response lends Guibourc a particular femininity, because her reaction is an emotional one; in a moment of weakness, she calls out in the manner of a “damsel in distress” which, if anything, can only elicit sympathy. Furthermore, she openly announces that they lack the protection of men.

Wolfram makes profound changes in the details of this episode in *Willehalm*. Gyburc takes an entirely different approach to her situation. Her response is not emotional, but rational and calculating. She tells her disguised husband: “ir sît ein heidensch man. / wen waent ir hie betriegen, daz ir sus kunnet liegen / von dem marcrâven âne nôt?” (89, 16-19: “You are a heathen [. . .] Whom do you think you can fool here by telling these stupid lies about the Margrave?” (57). She then threatens to knock him to the ground by hurling stones at him, telling him she will not allow him to remain at her castle gate (57). With her fearless and defiant response, she seeks to drive away what appears to be an enemy. In her threat of physically

assaulting him, she sets herself as an equal match to her male counterpart. Her goal is to sufficiently intimidate him by warning him that although she is a woman, she is not to be taken for a fool, nor is she someone with whom to be trifled. She acts instinctively and simultaneously with mental prowess. She continues to cleverly intimidate her enemy by bluffing that there are many knights inside the castle ready to fight: “maneger iu daz werthe, / iwer halden hie sus nâhen, / wan daz ez kan versmâhen / hie inne al mîner rîterschaft.” (89, 24-27: “Many a man would fight with you for venturing so close, if it were not for the fact that it is beneath the dignity of all my knights here” [57]). Yet although she threatens to use her knights, there is only one other man in the castle, the chaplain (57). Her manful ability to be clever is remarkable.

Gyburc is also endowed with great confidence, not only in her pursuit to defend Orange, but also as a wife. She knows her worth, and she neither denies nor dismisses it. She is unwilling to sacrifice this worthiness for anyone, not even for Willehalm. In contrast, Guibourc of *Aliscans* harbors a pronounced insecurity concerning the physical beauty of other women and its possible effect on her husband. She tells William as he leaves for battle:

“Now you will leave and go to France the prized
And leave me here alone in my sad plight [...]
And when you come to that rich land you’ll find
So many maids of face so fair and bright,
And ladies all so sumptuously attired,
I know full well I’ll vanish from your mind
And that you’ll love another in a short time!” (56, 1971-1977)

Although she ultimately reminds William that her loyalty deserves consideration, her confidence is weak. There is a marked difference in the way Wolfram’s Gyburc reacts in the same situation. She is far more self-assured in the matter. Gyburc is aware of the power of prolonged separation and realistically addresses the possibility of Willehalm’s infidelity. She cautions him to guard himself against female advances, not only by considering his own reputation, but also out of a

sense of duty to her. She reminds him that she has sacrificed and suffered a great deal for his sake, and she is confident that this deserves his fidelity and honor. She even reminds him that her status as queen has earned her great respect (63). *Aliscans*'s Guibourc lacks the inner confidence of her counterpart in the German epic, essentially placing herself at the mercy of her husband's discretion. While Gyburc maximizes her potential for worth, Guibourc minimizes hers in her final plea to William: "Do not forget this wretch you leave behind" (56, 2036).

Gyburc's most unique characteristic is her profound spirituality, which distinguishes her the most not only from her French counterpart, but from Wolfram's other women characters as well. There is a pronounced difference in the way in which Gyburc not only believes in the laws of God, but how she actively lives them, for as Bumke puts it, "Gyburgs Frömmigkeit ist gelebte Frömmigkeit" (*Wolfram's Willehalm*, 152) ("Gyburc's godliness is living godliness"). The commitment she has to her new religion is not self-centered but invested in others. Her faith is not a collection of passive proclamations about what she believes; she is wholeheartedly committed to the salvation of all human beings, including the heathen army. Significantly, Gyburc does not condemn the heathens for their ignorance of God's ways. Rather, she considers them, and all human beings for that matter, to be *gotes hantgetât*, "creations of God." She explains this at the council of war in Book VI, just before the final battle between the Christians and heathens. The council has been summoned for the purpose of addressing those who hold positions of military command. Gyburc, although a woman, is permitted to attend this male dominated council (a significant point I will address later in my paper), and she takes this opportunity to express to the assembly of princes her merciful posture toward the heathens. Her speech is known to Wolfram scholars as her *Schonungsgebot*, her exhortation to mercy:

"schönt der gotes hantgetât.
ein heiden was der êrste man

den got machen began.
 Nu geloubt daz Eljas und Enoch
 für heiden sint behalten noch.
 Nôê ouch ein heiden was,
 der in der arken genas.
 Iop für wâr ein heiden hiez,
 den got dar umbe niht verstiez.
 nu nemt ouch drîer kûnege war,
 der heizet einer Kaspar,
 Melchîor und Balthasân:
 die müeze wir für heiden hân,
 diene sint zer flûste niht benant:
 got selb enpfîenc mit sîner hant
 die ersten gâbe ân muoter Brust
 von in. die heiden hin zer flust
 sint alle niht benennet.” (306, 28-30; 307, 1-15)

(“spare the creatures of God’s Hand! The first man whom God created was a heathen and you should know for a fact that Elijah and Enoch, heathens though they were, are saved from eternal damnation. Noah, too, who was saved in the Ark, was a heathen, and Job was certainly also one, but God did not cast him down on that account. Think also of the three kings, whose names were Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, and whom we must consider as heathens who are not destined for damnation. God Himself, at His mother’s breast, received His first gifts from them. Heathens are not all condemned to perdition.”) [155]

For Gyburc, the heathens warrant the special attention of Christians, because they, like children, are born innocent and cannot be initially held accountable for their heathenism: “Als Geschöpfe Gottes, als potentielle Kinder Gottes sollen sie in ihrer Kreatürlichkeit geachtet werden.”¹³ (“they should be accepted as creations of God, as potential children of God”). Gyburc fully embraces the tenet of Christianity in which it is the duty of all Christians to reveal God to anyone who does not yet know Him. As children are innocent in God’s eyes, as soon as they are old enough to understand, they are taught the ways of God by other Christians; in this same way, the heathens should likewise be made aware of Him. Gyburc’s posture toward the heathens reflects how she is merciful; herein lies the core of her spiritual strength. She introduces a new concept

¹³ Bumke, *Wolfram’s Willehalm*, p. 155.

of religion: “Sie verkündet ein neues Gottesbild, eine neue Religion der Liebe und des Erbarmens. [. . .] Sie fordert eine neue Haltung gegenüber den Heiden”¹⁴ (she proclaims a new image of God, a new religion of love and mercy [. . .] she calls for a new attitude toward the heathens).

Moreover, Gyburc is the only one who advocates this posture: “in einer Dichtung, die voll ist von Waffenlärm, von Schlachtgetümmel und dem Schrei nach Rache, ist Gyburg die einzige, die zur Schonung aufruft, die zum Frieden mahnt”¹⁵ (“in a literary work which is full of the fray of weapon activity, battles and cries for revenge, Gyburc is the only one who makes an appeal for mercy, who calls for peace”). Through this quality alone, Wolfram sets her apart from all others. Gibbs affirms:

It is significant that [Gyburc] advocates mercy rather than tolerance, for mercy implies an attitude of the strong towards the weak. She does not demand that the Christians should accept the gods of the heathens, but that they should look with compassion upon those who have not become acquainted with the Christian God. [. . .] the sense of her own fortune serves to make her the more eager to urge mercy towards those who have not known the joy of this gift. (63)

The way in which Wolfram has placed Gyburc in the role of the “converted converter” makes her a powerful vehicle of Christianity. In the beginning of Book V, she urges her father to convert during a lull in the fighting. Her father tries to convince her to abandon Willehalm and her newfound Christianity, and although she boldly and defiantly confronts him with a refusal to negotiate, she does not simply dismiss Terramer with intolerance and anger, but rather offers a lengthy and respectful explanation for her decision to become a Christian and marry William (114, 115). Although she is engaged in an aggressive and heated debate with her father, she maintains the dignity to address him with kindness and respect “Ey vater hôh unde wert” (218, 1:

¹⁴ Bumke, *Wolfram's Willehalm*, p. 152.

¹⁵ Bumke, *Wolfram's Willehalm*, p. 153.

“Alas, my great and noble father” [115]). She does not hate him or seek revenge, but turns the other cheek and urges her father to embrace Christianity and save himself: “nu wirb umb sîne hulde.” (218, 30: “Seek His favour now!” [115]). Wolfram makes a significant spiritual statement through her, for it cannot be forgotten that Gyburc was once a heathen; her conversion illustrates how it is possible for anyone to receive Christianity.

With Gyburc, Wolfram has developed a new type of female figure: “zum ersten Mal wird im *Willehalm* die Frau religiös aktiv”¹⁶ (“for the first time in *Willehalm*, the woman becomes religiously active”). Although Guibourc’s actions in *Aliscans* are guided by her identity as a Christian, they appear to follow a traditional pattern common among many other women epic characters of medieval literature. While these characters may profess a loyal faith in God and are steadfast in their beliefs, they express their religiosity more through their proclamations of faith than through actions. For example, Guibourc of *Aliscans* might say something like: “I am your wedded wife, in God’s honor both blessed and sanctified” (56, 2031-2032) and Herzeloide explains God’s importance to Parzival by telling him that He is the “hoehste got” (119, 14: “Supreme God” [67]), and he should “vlêhe in umbe dîne nôt” (119, 23: “pray to Him when in trouble” [68]). It is clear that they believe in Him, but they are not active in their faith the way Gyburc is. As Bumke has shown, Wolfram might have developed such a character because of new conceptions of religious female figures that began developing in the 12th century. He offers the explanation that religion of the early middle ages was characterized by codes of behavior written for monks. Religious conduct was prescribed under an “umbrella” of masculinity, because although many convents existed for religious women, nuns adhered to the rules of the monasteries. There was very little independent female expression of spirituality.

¹⁶ Bumke, *Wolfram’s Willehalm*, p. 144.

Then, with the 12th century came “ein neues Bild der *femina spiritualis*, der religiösen Frau”¹⁷ (“a new image of the ‘*femina spiritualis*,’ the religious woman”). Wolfram was undoubtedly inspired by this new development in his creation of Gyburc, for she is a progressive manifestation of this new spiritual ideal for women.

Gyburc is deeply concerned with the promotion of her religion. Gyburc’s primary concern in defending Orange is not just to avoid death, but the consequences that would follow if she were to be killed. By protecting herself, she preserves Christianity: “Gyburc Orangis und ouch ir leben / ir vater so niht wolde geben, / daz er si selben tote / und drab die kristen note / den ungelouben meren.” (109, 17-21: “Giburc did not want to give up Orange and her life as well to her father, so that he might kill her himself and thereupon force the Christians to join the ranks of the unbelievers” [66]). She has the highest awareness of faith, and one that is not susceptible to, nor guided by, worldly matters or selfish concerns.

There is a great difference in the way Guibourc and Gyburc situate God in their lives. Guibourc of *Aliscans*’s expression of faith shows that her conversion to Christianity essentially rests with William, as opposed to God. Although it is clear that Guibourc’s faith in God is paramount, she repeatedly credits *William* with her salvation. She says to him: “I have sworn to be yours; your wedded wife I am in God the Lord; for you I have embraced the Christian Law and been baptized in God’s name” (51, 1804-1807), and again: “for you I took the faith of Jesus Christ” (56, 2033). We have the distinct impression that Guibourc’s devotion to her husband is equal to her devotion to God.

We see a shift in focus with Wolfram’s Gyburc. Although it is Willehalm who has brought Gyburc to Christianity, once she has been baptized, her importance as a Christian surpasses that of Willehalm. This is evident from the *Religionsgespräch* at the beginning of

¹⁷ See Bumke, *Wolfram’s Willehalm*, p. 144.

Book V. She piously asserts to her father, “ich hân den touf genomn / durch den der al die crêatiur / geschuof, daz wazzer und daz fiur, / dar zuo den luft unt d’erden. / der selbe hiez mich werden, / und al daz lebehaftes ist” (215, 10-15: “I have accepted baptism for the sake of Him who created all living things [. . .] he Himself summoned me into existence and everything that lives and breathes” [114]). We are even explicitly told by Willehalm that Gyburc’s decision to leave her country and marry him is only secondarily important to that of God: “daz tet si, durh den touf noch mer [. . .] / denne durh mine werdekeit” (298, 21-23: “but she did this [. . .] more on account of baptism than through any worth of mine” [151-152]).

It might be expected that Gyburc rather praise Willehalm here, since it is he who has brought her to Christianity and he whom she so dearly loves, but in an act of discipline and ethereal loyalty, she conforms strictly to the laws of God by placing no other before Him. She has a higher awareness that her salvation is accomplished not through her love for Willehalm, but alone through God. She recognizes that God is the force that allows her to love her husband. Her loyalty to God is so strong that she even rebukes Terramer for trying to separate her from Him: “Ey vater hôh unde wert, / daz dîn muot der tumpheit gert, / daz du mich scheiden wilt von dem, / der frouwen Even gap die schem / daz si alrêst verdact ir brust” (218, 1-5: “Alas, my great and noble father, that you persist in your folly of wanting to separate me from Him who gave the woman Eve her sense of shame to cover her breast for the first time” [115]).

It is true that Gyburc is also not content to give up Willehalm, for he is important to her, but she makes it clear that she has chosen to observe poverty for his sake: “Durch den hân ich mich bewegen / daz ich wil armüete pflegen” (216, 1-2: “It is for his sake that I have determined to observe poverty” [114]). This undoubtedly alludes to her former wealth as a queen in Arabie, for she points out to her father: “ich was ein küniginne, / swie arm ich urbor nu sî” (215, 26-27:

“I was a queen, no matter how poor in property I may be now” [114]). She has thus chosen to give up her former material luxuries and observe a material poverty for William’s sake, but now she is spiritually rich, and she makes it clear that the act of baptism she reserves exclusively for God. Upon a close reading of her *Religionsgespräch*, we can see that Gyburc places far more emphasis on the power of God over her life than the power of Willehalm. She stresses what God has made possible for her, for she references God almost twice as much in that speech than she does Willehalm. Wolfram gives her a devoutness that makes her ultimately, through both mind and body, an absolute vehicle of God.

By ascribing extraordinary piety to his female characters, Wolfram gives them a spiritual dimension absent in his French source. We first see this in the episode from *Parzival* where Herzelayde gives birth to Parzival. As she breastfeeds him, she says:

“diu hoehste küeginne
Jêsus ir brüste bôt,
der sît durch uns vil scharpfen tôt
ame criuze mennischliche enpfienç
und sîne triuwe an uns begienc.” (113, 17-22)

(“the supreme Queen gave her breasts to Jesus, Who afterwards for our sake met a bitter death in human form upon the Cross and Who kept faith with us.”) [63]

Just as the Virgin Mary fed Jesus, so does Herzelayde feed her son. Significantly, this is the only time that Wolfram ever makes an actual comparison between a female character and the Virgin.¹⁸ In *Willehalm*, Wolfram does not simply compare Gyburc to the holy figure, he bestows upon her the title of saint: “Ei Gîburc, heilic vrouwe” (403, 1: “Alas, Giburc, holy lady” [199]).¹⁹ In actively carrying out His plan by appealing for the mercy to the heathens by

¹⁸ See Gibbs, p. 10.

¹⁹ My translation.

showing the capacity to answer hate with love, Gyburc represents the epitome of God's love. These qualities make her a saint in the eyes of Wolfram.²⁰

Gyburc stands out among all other medieval literary female characters by not simply challenging and disrupting the patriarchal system, but by transcending conventional feminine subservience to it. Although women were exalted throughout medieval courtly literature, misogyny was never far away, firmly rooted in the strong patriarchal society. The societal constraints of medieval life made it difficult for women to assert themselves, especially because women were subject to the harsh reality of sexual degradation.²¹ While many women characters exhibited masculine attributes that allowed them to assert their own female powers, they were ultimately unable to maintain a stronghold on their male counterparts and quickly reduced to their "rightful" roles as women within the male hierarchical system. Even in *Parzival*, although Wolfram venerates many of his women characters, they are ultimately subordinate to the male figure, both in matters of love and in social power relations. In some cases the absence of the male even results in the death of the female, an illustration of the dependence that these women have on men. This is the case with Belekane and Herzeloyde of *Parzival*: Belekane dies of grief when Gahmuret deserts her, and Herzeloyde perishes when her son leaves. In *Aliscans*, William is indeed the hero who, upon his return to Orange, delivers Guibourc from the heathens she so desperately fears. It is noteworthy that although Gyburc, too, faints when Willehalm returns, she is not a victim of feminine fragility; upon closer examination this idea can be discounted, for upon Willehalm's final arrival to Orange, "Gyburge, diu durh vreud erschrac, / daz si unversunnen vor in lac." (228, 27-28: "Gyburc was so overcome with joy that she fell in a faint

²⁰ See Gibbs and Johnson, second introduction, p. 240.

²¹ See Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, p. 2.

in front of everyone” [119]). Gyburc is overcome with joy, not relief that she is being rescued by a man.

Gyburc continuously breaks through the confines of the patriarchal system and asserts her independence as a female. Not only is her fainting episode induced by joy, but when she recovers, she retains her role as defender of Orange after Willehalm has returned and is standing by her side: “Gyburc diu triwen rîche / stuont dennoch werlîche, / si unt ir juncfrouwen. / der wirt wol mohte schouwen / harnasch daz er an in vant” (231, 19-23: “Giburc, the ever-faithful woman, was standing there, with her maidens, still prepared to fight, and Willehalm could not fail to see the armour that they were wearing” [121]). This passage alone is enough to relativize Christopher Young’s thesis that Wolfram eventually reestablishes the patriarchal equilibrium by relegating women to a dependent state in the presence of a male. Instead, he creates a profoundly strong woman, and in doing so creates a woman who is able to rise above the prevailing attitudes of his time. Ultimately, what is important about Gyburc’s strength is not so much physical or military as it is spiritual, as her behavior in the council of war in Book VI makes clear.

Gyburc notably breaks through the patriarchal system during her speech to the council. First and foremost, although she is a woman, she is both permitted to attend and speak out at this male dominated political gathering of princes and military commanders. Wolfram places her in an unprecedented situation; according to the late 12th century *Rhetorica Ecclesiastica*: “it was not the business of women to judge, to rule, to instruct, or to bear witness.”²² Willehalm opens the meeting by pointing out the atrocities the heathens have inflicted upon his people:

“mîn sweher ist ûf mich geritn,
den getouften wîben sint gesnitn

²²As quoted from Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, p. 349.

ab die brüste, gemarteret sint ir kint,
die man in gar erslagen sint” (297, 13-16)

(“My father-in-law has attacked me. The breasts of Christian women have been cut off, their children martyred. Their menfolk have all been slain” [151]).

He then appeals to his men to take revenge on the heathens in God’s name: “nu êrt an mir der meide kint, / ob ich sô müeze sprechen: / helft mîne mâge rechen” (298, 28-30: “honour the Virgin’s Son through me. Help me avenge my kinsmen” [152]). However, while Willehalm rails against the heathens for revenge, Gyburc stands up and asserts her position of mercy; she publicly challenges the very ideas of her husband. Her religious conviction compels her to fight for mercy, despite the fact that she openly disagrees with her husband, whose voice during that time would have been understood to be dominant over that of a woman’s. Her solitary stance is bold. Although she is surrounded by males, she asserts her determination to carry out her beliefs and breaks through the patriarchal structure that surrounds her. The fact that she is never reprimanded for her bold actions against the prevailing patriarchy only serves to confirm how she successfully places herself as an equal to her male counterparts; no longer subservient in “their” world. Whereas the women of *Parzival* and *Aliscans* ultimately reassume their traditional role as the weaker sex within the patriarchy, Gyburc’s words and actions tell a completely different story.

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