Agostes in *The Greene Knight*: Widow, mother, and *witch sole*[1]

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Following a linear textual approach, and set in the context of late medieval and early modern ideas on witchcraft as portrayed in popular literature and culture, this article will discuss the character of Agostes in the ballad *The Greene Knight*. This study will look at her in relation to her nature as mother and *witch sole*: an old woman, usually a widow or a mother-in-law, who is not under husband escort and therefore performs and works on her own terms. Agostes is the unifying cause, the starter of the female-desire plot, and the main concocter of events in the ballad. First, this article will seek to illuminate her relationship to the rest of the characters in the narrative, particularly her daughter. Second, it will shed light on her narrative function, identity, and characterisation, providing an exploration of the ambiguities and problematics that she ostensibly poses. For example, I seek to demonstrate that she is a peculiar variation of the archetype of the wicked stepmother-witch.

For my analysis, I have particularly drawn on Heidi Breuer's (2009) analysis of late medieval and early modern witches in English literature. I have also considered Diane Purkiss's (2005) discussion of the figure of the witch in stories (with some references to history) in Elizabethan England. The present study is relevant for the understanding of Agostes's agency in the text, as well as her explicit *raison d'être* as opposed to Morgan le Fay's obscure role in the *Gawain*-poet's chivalric romance.

Keywords: late medieval and early modern English witchcraft; *witch sole*; mother; widow; magic; desire

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[1] I am very thankful to Dr Rubén Valdés Miyares for his comments and suggestions at all the stages in the process of writing this article.

David Navarrete, *Selim* 23 (2018): 139–162.
ISSN 1132-631X

1. Introduction

The Greene Knight (*GK* henceforward) is a "late fifteenth-century balladic romance" (Matthews 1994: 301) found in the Percy Folio, an early modern manuscript written around 1650.[2] *GK* was written to be recited, that is, it was meant to be orally performed (Hahn 1995: 309). Just like its medieval counterpart *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK* henceforward), this ballad deals with the opposition between the already known, the orthodox, and the familiar; and the mysterious or 'Other', having a witch's machinations at its very core.

GK has been mostly received negatively by scholars, who are all agreed on its lack of stylistic beauty and literary refinement. Such unfavourable view is chiefly due to the comparisons made between the ballad and its highly

[2] There are different interpretations about the nature and origins of *GK*. For example, it is considered to be a derivation of *SGGK* but with some elements from a well-known, oral version added by the ballad's author (Hulbert 1916: 702). Another hypothesis is that *GK* is likely to be a translation of another text which might or might not be the *Gawain*-poet's well-known alliterative work (Matthews 1994: 303). Other scholars believe the ballad "might well be a written record of the sort of recital mentioned by Robert Laneham in a letter describing festivities put on for Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth in 1575" (Hahn 1995: 309). Hahn's hypothesis is a probable origin for the text, and one that makes sense to me considering the popularity of ballads among people of all social ranks (also the aristocracy) at the end of the English Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Hahn goes on to say that

> Laneham offers an account of Captain Cox, a performance artist 'hardy as Gawain', who acts, sings, recites, and professes 'philosophy both morall and naturall.' Cox possesses [...] within his memory and ready for recital on demand a vast repertoire of stories, including ballads, songs, perhaps plays, and romances [...] Just which Gawain romance this was is not specified, for the Percy Folio Manuscript (where *The Greene Knight* occurs) makes clear that such popular performances provided the precise milieu where the surviving poem was produced. (Hahn 1995: 309–310)

I think the previous quotation is worth including at full length because it reflects the popular, oral nature that ballads such as *GK* would have had at the time, hence their general public appeal. Such literary works would not be received by audiences as refined courtly romances meant to be read.

acclaimed predecessor, *SGGK*. The transformation of the fourteenth century literary masterpiece into a ballad provoked a very strong reaction on the part of scholars, who have considerably neglected the latter.

For example, there are some hints regarding matters of literary style and genre that suggest that *GK* is placed outside the medieval tradition of courtly love, consequently losing a great deal of the literary and allegorical beauty that its medieval counterpart displays. First, as it is well-known among scholars, the ballad has been mostly quoted marginally in diverse critical studies for its unattractive style and low level of detail, exacerbated by the fact that *SGGK* (with which the ballad has very often been compared) is considered one of the most brilliant, sophisticated Arthurian romances in English literature. Second, besides not showing any signs of refinement in the use of language, the undistinguished scribe (or "uninspired author", using the words of Cory James Rushton 2009: 177) omitted the scenes of courtly conversation among the lady and the knight, perhaps because the ballad format does not allow space for such delicacies, usually expressed through intricate rhetoric figures, similes, and metaphors in medieval courtly love romance.[3]

Nonetheless, taking into consideration all the information that the ballad provides concerning the relationship between the Lady and Gawain (as well as her husband), one can certainly argue that *GK* is actually not situated outside of this tradition. The trope of the (married) lady's impossible, unrequited love for a knight is one of the most characteristic traits of courtly romance (both in medieval and Renaissance English love lyrics). Moreover, her identity as 'The Lady of the Castle' and her role as infatuated woman are undoubtedly shaped according to the code of *fin'amor*. Therefore, *GK* turns out to be a ballad which partially represents a literary tradition which, even though found itself in a state of decadence at the time, was still very influent in Elizabethan and Tudor England, as we can observe, for example, in the adoration of Gloriana, the Faerie Queen, in Edmund Spenser's eponymous poem.[4]

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[3] Let us remember that, in *SGGK*, courtly love is central to the seduction scenes, where we find all the speech from the Lady of Hautdesert.

[4] After the publication of Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur*, courtly love lost a lot of literary prestige and influence. For example, John Huizinga argued in 1922 that the sudden change in fifteenth-century allegory revealed an "artistic *decadence*" (using Helen Cooney's words), a view which, however, has been seen as anachronistic (Cooney 2006: 139). For more information about this literary tradition in medieval English literature, see Lewis (1936), in which the author also

GK is a ballad based on a story from a romance (*SGKK*) that deals with the deeds of one of the most distinguished knights of King Arthur: Sir Gawain. Stories, romances, and tales of the Knights of the Round Table were highly popular in the European Middle Ages until they became unfashionable and disappeared from the literary scene. (Some of them were transformed into ballads and gained a lot of popularity, but such is not the case for *GK*.) Being a chivalric text at its heart, *GK* is actually a hybrid of traditions and genres: it has motifs from medieval Arthurian romance but the structure and style of popular ballads.[5] More interestingly, it provides an interesting character shaped according to representations of witches, mothers, and widows in late medieval and early modern England.

The ballad bears a remarkable resemblance to *SGGK* but, as mentioned above in a footnote, Matthews (1994) argues that the former is not based on the romance but on another text whose plot derives from that of the fourteenth-century poem. So far as I am aware, Matthews's study is the only one which offers a thorough analysis of the ballad and the characters in it. Unlike him, the vast majority of scholars have considered the text a debasement of its predecessor, ignoring everything that *GK* has to say. However, Matthews (1994: 301-303) considers the ballad independently of *SGGK* and pays special attention to its motifs, ideology, narratorial authority, and characters' respective narrative function.

GK tells the story of Sir Bredbeddle, "a man of mickele might / And Lord of great bewtye" (ll. 41–24) who is sent by her mother-in-law (the witch Agostes) to Carlisle in order to bring Gawain to her daughter (the Lady of Hutton) at Hutton Castle.[6] The lady (Sir Bredbeddle's wife) is in love with Gawain and wants to meet him, so her mother concocts a plan to fulfil her

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discusses several early modern English texts, such as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Cooney (2006).

[5] Matthews points out that "[c]omposed at the end of the Middle Ages, it is poised between two eras: it looks back to the fourteenth century's use of the Arthurian legend as cultural legitimation, while in its form it signals the disappearance of Arthur into popular song and ballad, and the end of medieval romance" (1994: 312–313).

[6] All the line numbers belong to Thomas Hahn's (1995) edition of *GK* in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Depending on the scholar, the spelling of the Green Knight's name varies. The same occurs with the way they address the Lady. I have chosen to refer to her as 'The Lady of Hutton'. Like in *SGGK*, she is nameless in the ballad, too.

daughter's desire. Sir Bredbeddle obeys Agostes's command, but takes advantage of the situation and offers King Arthur's court a challenge (the so-called and well-known 'Beheading Game' from *SGGK*) aimed at Gawain, who fearlessly takes it up. Therefore, two different plots can be discerned in the ballad. The female-plot, concerned with the realisation of the Lady's desire (and the focus of the present article); and the male-plot, which deals with the deeds and political aspirations of the two knights.

The character of Agostes, the focal point of my study, has been generally ignored by scholars over the decades. Except for Matthews, who published an article on *The Greene Knight* in 1994 in which he makes some interesting remarks about her, critics have paid very little (if at all) attention to the witch. Whereas Matthews's work is concerned with different aspects and characters in the narrative, mine will solely be focused on Agostes.[7]

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[7] Though the present article is by no means an anthroponomical study, the name of Agostes definitely sheds light on her character. Thomas Hahn argues in a footnote as follows: "So far as I know, this name does not occur elsewhere in Arthurian literature, though the connection between her supernatural powers of witchcraft and the consonance of *Agostes* with 'ghostly' is striking. Agostes' counterpart in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan le Fay, is called 'Argante' in Layamon's *Brut*" (Hahn 1994: 330). Rubén Valdés Miyares implicitly suggests that Agostes's *true* identity is a matter of ambiguity, wondering whether or not the Greene Knight's mother-in-law is actually Morgan le Fay, A-Ghostess, or Argante (Valdés Miyares 2003–2004: 153). I endorse the view that she is the counterpart of Morgan le Fay in *GK*, yet her identity is somewhat changed in the ballad, and therefore, she is actually a different character and should be considered as such. Both of the aforementioned scholars seem to have found an etymological connection between 'Argante' (or 'Agostes') and 'ghostliness', but they only put forward said connection and did not explore the witch's name. According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* the adjective *august* from Old French *auguste* and Latin *augustus* ('consecrated', 'venerable') has two senses: 1) Inspiring reverence and admiration; solemnly grand, stately; and 2) Venerable by birth, status, or reputation; eminent, dignified; (sometimes as an honorific). In my opinion, Agostes fits the two senses of the word: she is, like Alison of Bath, "a sort of *magistra amoris*, a mock-serious authority on matters of human desire" (Cooney 2006: 100). Kittredge refers to her as a "procuress [...] whose eccentric name [is] doubtless a corruption for something or other" (1916: 134). The Late Middle English adjective *aghast*, meaning 'terrified; struck with amazement'; and the noun *aghastness* ('horror') are also reminiscent of the witch's name. Both seem to be indicative of Agostes's eerie, shadowy identity.

2. Introducing Agostes

Unlike Morgan le Fay in the *Gawain*-poet's romance, Agostes has a voice of her own and enjoys a more active role than the powerful sorceress in the fourteenth-century poem. Whereas both have a pivotal role in the poems in which they appear, Morgan le Fay is moved by her malice and hatred for her kinship, but Agostes is driven by her love or care for her daughter. Therefore, these two women represent two opposing characters: one seeks to destroy or harm her family, and the other wants to help them. Another difference between the two old women is that the *Gawain*-poet accounts for a lengthy description of Morgan le Fay's clothes, facial features, and body, whose ugliness makes a sharp contrast with the Lady of Hautdesert's outstanding beauty ("Ho watz þe fayrest in felle [...] wener þen Wenore", ll. 943–945).[8] On the contrary, the ballad's author does not describe Agostes's physicality at all, even though considering that she is an old witch, it is extremely hard to imagine her as good-looking or having an attractive figure. She must indeed resemble the loathly lady from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* or Allisson Gross from the eponymous ballad. Moreover, her speech (like her name) is suggestive of authority over the two male figures in the ballad, and functions as one of her most distinctive features, as shall be discussed below.

Agostes appears or is alluded to in three different passages throughout the ballad. First, she is introduced at the very beginning of the text, shortly afterwards we know of her daughter's longing for her paramour (ll. 43–48) and the witch's command that her son-in-law go to Carlisle for Gawain (ll. 58–66). Second, the narrator mentions the witch's black magic powers when Gawain beheads Sir Bredbeddle/the Green Knight, who afterwards picks up his own head, speaks, and takes off to his castle. Such a gruesome, unnatural act is attributed to Agostes's dark magic ("All this was done by enchantment / That the old witch had wrought", ll. 212–213). Third, when Gawain arrives at Hutton Castle, Agostes takes her daughter to Gawain's bedroom, tells the knight to wake up, and (implicitly) commands him to engage in sexual intercourse with her daughter (ll. 363–376).[9] However, as will be discussed below, she only enjoys relevance in the first half of the ballad.

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[8] Line numbers belong to Tolkien & Gordon's (1967) edition of *SGGK*.

[9] The respective discussions and details of these three passages will be provided in the subsequent sections.

The three aforementioned passages reveal a significant agency in the figure of Agostes, the ultimate authority in the ballad and the character with the hardest task to complete. Moreover, it should be highlighted that the female plot that she unleashes is not (unlike in *SGGK*) residual or dependent on the Green Knight's narrative role and motivations. There is a clear disconnection between the male and the female storylines in the ballad.

3. Agostes's machinations

Agostes's motives are clear from the beginning of the text. She does not explicitly mention that her son-in-law's journey is actually a search for bringing Gawain to her daughter at Hutton Castle, but the audience is obviously aware of her true intentions because of the information provided in the text. Everything that she does is to realise her daughter's longing. Matthews rightly argues that

> in *The Grene Knight* the main threat is refocused; what remains threateningly unfamiliar in the narrative is woman. Femininity is recreated as the necessary other to feudal, political order, for in a much more obvious way than in Sir Gawain, the plot of the later poem is motivated by feminine transgressions: Bredbeddle's lady falls in love with Gawaine's reputation; her mother then arranges to procure the knight for her by manipulating her husband; Agostes is of course a witch. Bredbeddle, unlike Bertilak, is the apparently unknowing victim of her plot. (Matthews 1994: 310)

The information above is crucial to understand the role of women in the narrative. More importantly, I do not read Agostes as ill-intentioned or threatening to the men in the narrative. Instead, I look at her as a mother willing and eager to help her daughter. Apparently prompted by honourable reasons, she is intervening kindly in a family affair.

The following lines are very relevant for the understanding of the ballad's plot and Agostes's interest in Gawain:

> All was for her daughters sake,
> That which she soe sadlye spake
> To her sonne-in-law the knight:
> Because Sir Gawaine was bold and hardye,

> And therto full of curtesye,
> To bring him into her sight. (ll. 61–66)

Fulfilling her daughter's desire is manifestly a matter of importance for her, as her earnestness makes clear in line 62. She wishes to bring Gawain to the Lady because he is bold, strong, and courteous. He is a good party, exemplary, probably the knight who any lady would have wanted for herself, and the man who any mother would have wished for her daughter, in a medieval romance. Fulfilling the Lady of Hutton's desire (which might as well be a fantasy or need) is the backbone of the story and the only concern of the witch, to whom Sir Bredbeddle quickly responds that he will do so "for to praise thee [i.e. Agostes] right, / And to prove Gawaines points three" (ll. 69–70). Line 70 suggests (as mentioned in the introduction) that not only is he going to stick to Agostes's orders, but he is also going to test Gawain's renown to verify whether the hero is the knight that everyone says he is. At this point in the narrative, the story is split in two different plots: a male (the testing of Gawain) and a female one (the pleasing of the Lady of Hutton). As the ballad advances, we become increasingly aware that Sir Bredbeddle is more concerned with the former plot (the challenge of the renown knight), but the interest of Agostes (and the Lady) is the fruition of female desire.

4. Female desire

In *SGGK*, the plot seems to be limited to the testing of Gawain's renown, whereas female interests seem to remain secondary. But *GK* differs here. Agostes is a far more outspoken female figure than Morgan le Fay in her articulation of desire.[10] In fact, I believe that *GK* is clearly concerned with

[10] The concept of female desire in Renaissance literature has been widely explored by scholars through psychoanalytical and feminist theory. One case in point is Finucci & Schwartz (1994). Also, Deleuze & Guattari (1983) have explored the concept of desire in capitalist societies in their book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which they introduce the term 'Anti-Oedipal': the rejection of the family, religion, and territory because of the coercive nature that these have on individuals. Most importantly for the purposes of the present article, Deleuze & Guattari put forward a definition of desire understood not as lack (in the case of Agostes, her daughter's apparent uneasiness or unhappiness because of her unrequited love for Gawain) but as

women's longings and ambitions as well as their ways of making these come true. In relation to the notion of the fulfilment of women's wishes, also known as the motif of the realisation of desire, Agostes's apparent anxiety (which shall be discussed below) is suggestive of a mother's concern with the fulfillment of her maternal duties towards her daughter. Even though the witch does not seem to be under pressure, she has a great responsibility in the ballad: if her scheme does not go as planned, it means that her daughter's desire will not be met.[11]

Considering the arguments put forward hitherto, I believe that Agostes in *GK* is more resolute than Morgan le Fay in *SGGK* for several reasons. Firstly, let us remember that she does not seem to have evil intentions ("All was for her daughters sake" l. 61) despite the fact that she is implicitly addressed to an old woman with bizarre magic powers ("Shee cold transpose knights and swaine / Like as in battaile they were slaine, / Wounded in lim and light", ll. 52–54). Secondly, unlike Morgan le Fay, who machinates on the margins of the plot, Agostes takes part in it, literally taking the Lady of Hutton to Gawain once he has arrived at the castle. She is not thoroughly passive: she has her son-in-law do part of the job, but she also gets involved in it.

Agostes is defined in relation to a woman (her daughter) rather than a man. More importantly for studies of women's agency, she operates freely

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something that is actually beneficial or productive for the individual in question: Agostes is working towards her daughter's well-being by creating a system or strategy (i.e. her plot to bring Gawain to Hutton Castle) through which her desire can be fulfilled (1983: 48).

[11] Heide Breuer argues that some medieval and early modern English make-over romances, such as 'The Tale of Florent', *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, *SGGK*, and *GK*,

> [...] respond to the newly-developed possibilities for female economic and legal agency; they mitigate an anxiety about the effect of increased economic power on the traditional family position of women as mothers [...] In early modern England, when the population was faced with a living example of strong, capable, and (perhaps most importantly) non-maternal female power, as embodied by the unmarried and childless Queen Elizabeth I, the anxiety was surely even more intense, a fact that has received no small amount of attention in early modern studies. (Breuer 2009a: 94)

See Section 6 for a more detailed explanation of the idea of anxiety in Agostes.

towards her goal by using Sir Bredbeddle in her own interests. Judging by lines 46–66 of the ballad (mentioned above), it might be readily deduced that both mother and daughter are cooperating, Agostes being the head of the operation. *GK* is, in my view, a narrative clearly concerned with the relationship among a mother, her daughter, and her son-in-law, as well as with the desires and aspirations of the family's members. (It would be mistaken to call this ballad a "family narrative", though.) But this relationship is quite peculiar (to say the least): the witch uses his son-in-law as a tool for her own daughter's adultery and he is compliant and aware of it all from the outset.[12]

Half of the ballad's plot revolves around the interests of women, however marginalised they are in the narrative: out of 515, only twenty verses are devoted to Agostes's traits, dialogue, and actions, thirteen of which are her own speech. Both women enjoy the same number of spoken lines in the ballad, which is anyway a very small sum. It is evident that their voices are repressed, but whereas the Lady of Hutton's words are not particularly relevant to the plot, Agostes's clearly are. She might not speak too much, but what she says is crucial: her words are the vehicle through which the entire ballad comes to being. She commands Sir Bredbeddle to go to Carlisle and bring Gawain to her daughter, and once he has done so, it is time for Agostes to exercise her influence, which she also does through her speech. Her determination (embodied by her speech) and magic powers are her only weapons, both of which render her a figure of agency. Once Gawain has arrived at Hutton Castle, Agostes emerges —in Kittredge's (1916: 135)— as "mistress of the situation", that is, the one in charge of handling the relationship between her daughter and Gawain.

[12] Sir Bredbeddle does not raise any objection to his wife's infidelity, maybe because he knew that Sir Gawain would never get involved in an amorous or sexual relationship with a married woman, or perhaps because had he refused Agostes's orders, he would have had to pay a very high cost because of his refusal to obey a witch. Just like he was turned into a green knight, so could he have suffered the witch's gruesome powers as punishment if he had not done as told. In my view, Agostes does not come across as compassionate to anyone but her daughter.

5. Mother-daughter bond

Agostes is above anything else a witch-mother defined in terms of motherhood and concerned with her daughter's contentment. The witch is introduced as the Lady of Hutton's mother who, through "witchcraft and noe other", (l. 40) "dealt with all" (l. 51). In ballads, mothers-in-law are powerful figures with influence over the rest of the characters. In the context of early modern women's depositions in witchcraft cases and fantasies regarding witches, Purkiss argues that the identity of the witch as mother is "central to understanding the stories that are told [...] the role of [the] mother [...] was even more central to early modern notions of maternal identity [than it is nowadays]" (2005: 99). Purkiss addresses stories of mothers as providers of food for their children and the household (2005: 99). Seen in this light, I believe that there is a clear connection with the relationship between Agostes and her daughter: the former literally "provides" (i.e. Gawain) and the latter is metaphorically "fed" (with the knight's company). Breuer (2009b: 12) argues that the witches in texts such as *GK* and 'The Tale of Florent' exemplify an "extreme anxiety over maternity" in the context of sixteenth-century England. Whereas Breuer supports part of her arguments drawing on the economic situation of English women at the time, I simply read Agostes as a mother who is anxious over accomplishing her daughter's desire.

Interestingly enough, Purkiss points out that "early modern women saw witches as inverted mothers, and [...] in some cases the death of the mother was the result of the witch's usurpation" (2005: 107). Witches were feared and seen as anti-maternal, embodying all that is bad about motherhood. However, Agostes is not the case. Whereas she is certainly portrayed as stereotyped in the way that she behaves (as explained above), she is not a degraded maternal figure, hence the subversion of the popular characterisation of witches as destructive. Breuer rightly argues that

> [t]he wicked witches of the [late medieval] make-over narratives are mothers, but not birth mothers: they are step-mothers and mother-in-law. While mothers-in-law might be married, they might also be widows. Indeed, Agostes, the mother-in-law in *Greene*, operates as a *witch sole*, working her magic without the nuisance of a husband; as she has a daughter, the implication is that she's a widow. (Breuer 2009b: 3)

In literature, witches and widows are two of the most well-known archetypes with negative connotations of authority, power, and free choice, as particularly reflected in early modern English texts. The degree of agency is doubled when the character in question is both a witch and a widow, as Agostes.

In terms of mother-daughter relationships, Agostes operates as two sides of the same coin. She wants to help the Lady, but doing so means having her daughter commit adultery and what this transgression entails: "undermin[ing] the foundation of Christian marriage" (Breuer 2009a: 86) and ostensibly risking his son-in-law's life.[13] Also, it could be argued that Agostes is actually committing a transgression by heading a plot against her son-in-law for the benefit of the Lady of Hutton.[14] But, for the purposes of this article, it should be emphasised that her characterisation, actions, and speech render her a figure worthy of evaluation in terms of late medieval and early modern ideas of the realisation of female desire and motherhood. As Breuer points out, "Agostes attempts to provide her daughter access to a famous knight, in effect side-stepping the aristocratic reliance on patriarchal marriage, in which female desire is unimportant" (2009a: 86). In *GK*, women's aspirations are certainly far from being insignificant. Agostes, who commiserates only with her daughter, acts against gender expectations and violates those rules that hinder her from accomplishing her goal.

[13] She is not preoccupied with the hardships to which Sir Bredbeddle is going to be exposed throughout his journey, fraught with numerous dangers, all the way to Carlisle, far away from Hutton Castle. Perhaps, she trusts that his son-in-law has, like Gawain, prowess in battle and is not going to have any sort of trouble.

[14] Sir Bredbeddle's revelation at the end of the ballad that he was aware of his wife's feelings is problematic. He eventually confesses that he knew of her wife's love for Gawain all the time, which raises two hypotheses: either the scribe misunderstood the plot (Sir Bredbeddle is not supposed to know anything about the female plot, as it is signalled in the text) or the Greene Knight pretended not to be aware of it. He is thankful that Gawain did not engage in sexual intercourse with her out of respect for him (ll. 486–488).

6. Agostes in action

One of the defining features of Agostes is her noticeable anxiety. When Sir Bredbeddle goes out hunting and Sir Gawain is still asleep, "Up rose the old witche with hast throwe / And to her dauhter can shee goe / And said, 'Be not adread!'" (ll. 363–365).[15] Then,

> To her daughter can shee say,
> 'The man that thou hast wisht many a day,
> Of him thou maist be sped,
> For Sir Gawaine, that curteous knight,
> Is lodged in this hall all night.'
> She brought her to his bedd. (ll. 366–371)

> Shee saith, 'Gentle knight, awake!
> And for this faire ladies sake,
> That hath loved thee so deere,
> Take her boldly in thine armes.
> There is noe man shall doe thee harme.'
> Now beene they both heere. (ll. 372–377)

As we can observe in these lines, she runs to her daughter and tells her not to be afraid. The hero is finally at the castle and it is time for Agostes to do her task. In my view, these lines evoke a clear feeling of anxiety. An old witch running in a rush —"with all haste" (Hahn 1995: 324) and/or "eager" (Hales & Furnivall 1868: 56)— towards her daughter makes up a peculiar image. The witch seems anxious and even more enthusiastic than her daughter, who is a rather passive character, about bringing the Lady to Gawain, most likely

[15] Line 365 (quoted above) is rather intriguing: when Agostes runs in a hurry towards her daughter, knowing that Gawain is alone in his chamber, she tells the Lady not to be afraid. Why Agostes says so remains a mystery to me unless her daughter is actually scared of committing adultery (whether or not she has her husband's consent to sleep with another man), she is bashful about it, she is inexperienced in matters of love, or maybe she has just changed her mind about the idea of having a lover. Be that as it may, Agostes is determined to doing as designed. In this context, it is interesting to note that the passiveness of the Lady, added to her apparent reservedness, build an image of her sharply different from the uninhibited Lady of Hautdesert in *SGGK*.

because realising her daughter's yearning is a matter of concern for her, as stated before.

The idea of anxiety is represented only superficially but I believe it is indeed revealed in the character of Agostes, as the lines above show. The concept of anxiety in Middle English and early modern texts has been vastly explored by scholars, mostly in the portrayals of boisterous, noisy, and unruly women.[16] Two cases in point are *SGGK* or *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, narratives clearly concerned with men's anxiety about female power. But many of these texts are not directly concerned with maternal commitment, whereas *GK* is. Agostes's notorious agency throughout the female-plot can only be understood in relationship with her magic powers and, most importantly, her daughter's desire. The fulfillment of the Lady's desire is the trigger of the witch's anxiety.

The fact that Agostes is more active (most of the weight of the female-plot lies on her) suggests that not only the concept of desire is represented differently on the male than in the female characters, it also operates discordantly in the two women. The characterisation of Agostes as an old witch skilled in the magic arts might be the reason why she comes across as more confident: elderliness goes hand in hand with experience and knowledge.

Lines 367 and 374 (quoted above) reassert the Lady's strong, passionate desire and love for Gawain;[17] but most importantly, they reveal an important trait of Agostes's character. When the witch confidently takes the Lady to Gawain's bed, she commits a transgression or boundary-breaking: she literally crosses the imaginary line that separates the private (Gawain's alcove) from the rest of the space in the castle. In other words, she enters a personal place in which she should not be, a supposedly intimate place not to be trespassed, least of all with the witch's intentions. Therefore, her intrusion into Gawain's bedroom consequently identifies her with an obtrusive, obscene character.

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[16] Scholarship on anxiety over agency in later Middle English literature is too vast to be noted here, but one case that I consider especially relevant is L'Estrange & More (2012).

[17] It appears as if she is truly in love with the renowned knight of the Round Table, but either there is something that hinders her from going by herself to Gawain (perhaps she is too inexperienced or young and does not know how to act under such circumstances) or her mother is domineering or overbearing and decides to guide her daughter through the plan that she devised.

Discussing some early modern cases of witchcraft at the popular and domestic level, Purkiss argues from a gender perspective that

> the threshold, as the name implies, is a liminal space, the boundary between inside and outside [...] It is the association of female identity with maintaining the boundaries of and order in the house which makes the witch a fearful fantasy if what can happen when those bounds are transgressed. (Purkiss 2005: 98)[18]

Purkiss's analysis can help illuminate my discussion of Agostes's inadequate behaviour before one of the finest and most courteous knights of medieval romance. (In the case of Hutton, we are dealing here with a castle and a witch instead of a house and a housewife, though.) Agostes actually opposes Purkiss' idea of maintenance of order and what this implies, such as peace and tranquillity. In this passage, she functions as a disturber of harmony and perpetrator of disorder; she operates as a sort of (using Purkiss's terms) "grotesque presence" (2005: 224).[19] Even though she is not a grotesque character in its own right, she does present some traits of grotesqueness, not understood as monstrosity, freakishness or deformity, but as a deviation from the norm; in this case, from the courtly etiquette, as manifested in her impropriety. I believe Agostes is a grotesque character because she is a mother who is intervening good-heartedly in a family affair and is prompted by honourable reasons, but, at the same time, she carries out her manoeuvre through the employment of apparently disquieting, threatening means. This

[18] Purkiss points out that "whereas most historians see the witch as the church's Other, or as man's Other, I'm suggesting here that early modern women could also represent the witch as *their* Other, that female anxieties, fears and self-fashioning could also shape the notion of 'witch' at popular level" (2005: 97). In the context of women's witnesses depositions at witch-trials, she goes on to argue that "some women's stories of witchcraft constituted a powerful *fantasy* which enabled women to negotiate the fears and anxieties of [...] motherhood" (2005: 93). Whereas I do not read the character of Agostes in the context of witch-trials or as a threat to her daughter, I do view her as suggestive of women's anxiety about motherhood, just as Breuer does.

[19] Purkiss uses the term 'grotesque presence' in a different context, but I think it can be equally applied to the character at hand.

ambiguity leaves her in a liminal position, the epitomic characteristic of the grotesque.[20]

Indeed, misrule and misbehaviour are one of the main traits of witches, just like they were in several medieval and early modern popular festivities. Stuart Clark argues that

> [t]hroughout the late medieval and Renaissance period ritual inversion was a characteristic element of village folk-rites, religious and educational *ludi*, urban carnivals and court entertainments. Such festive occasions shared a calendrical licence to disorderly behaviour or 'misrule' based on the temporary but complete reversal of customary priorities of status and value. (Clark 1980: 101)

Agostes displays some traits of witches from late medieval and Renaissance rituals and spectacles of inversion, but in a different context from the one that Clark suggests above. In the passage at play, not only does Agostes trespass and cause chaos, but she also takes the liberty to give Gawain orders (or, at least, that is what can be inferred from lines 372–377, quoted above). She uses the word "gentle" to refer to Gawain, but her bold speech and unflinching determination are suggestive of a more discourteous conduct. Gawain holds a very high social rank (he is one of the Knights of the Round Table and King Arthur's nephew), an elevated position of authority, and notorious refined manners, all of which makes a sharp contrast with Agostes's inhospitable attitude and demeanour. The witch's lack of courtliness and sophistication towards the knight further reinforce the uncourtly atmosphere that she creates. More importantly, they are suggestive of the stereotypical configuration of witches as misbehaving women.

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[20] The grotesque is one of the most subjective and flexible literary genres or pictorial forms. It "defies the notion of categorization altogether" (Harpham 1976: 464) and its features are not fixed. Even though there is no one definition of the term but many, there is something common to all of them: the grotesque is chiefly characterised by the split against the ordinary, the common, and the familiar, always represented through threatening bizarre or monstrous characters and ludicrous situations (1976: 462–463). But most importantly, this term is defined as liminality or ambiguity. I believe that Agostes definitely displays some grotesque trait for the reasons explained above. My definition of the grotesque is based on Bakhtin (1984), Russo (1994), Edwards & Graulund (2013), and Danow (1995).

7. Magic powers and witchy skills

Another point worth exploring in the character of Agostes is her power: what kind of magic she knows and what this can disclose about her agency and identity as a witch. Even though we have almost no information at all about her in the ballad, what we know about her suffices to explore her dark witching skills. We only witness her powers in the narrative twice. First, when she transforms Sir Bredbeddle into the Green Knight (even though the scribe's clumsiness in the depiction of the Green Knight reveals that he is only wearing green-coloured clothes but is not green himself, hence his lack of supernaturalness). Second, when the Green Knight is beheaded and immediately afterwards grabs his head and starts talking. He does not bleed to death, which can only be explained by magic. These two events in the narrative come from the powers of Agostes, as we are informed by the ballad's author. Her agency is emphasised by the narrator's insight into her magic skills in lines 52–54 (see Section 4 above), in which we can read that, through her powers, she can make people look as if they had been harmed in battle. Also, in lines 55–57 ("She taught her sonne the knight alsoe / In transposed likenesse he shold goe / Both by fell and frythe"), we read that she is the one who teaches Sir Bredbeddle his knowledge of witchcraft. Her son-in-law would perhaps be helpless without her because he owes his magic to the witch.[21]

The previous passages reveal the kind of magic that Agostes knows: transformative power, which consists in the ability to manipulate and change

[21] Sir Bredbeddle is "a venterous knight" (l. 345) who "works by witchcraft day and night, / With many a great furley" (ll. 346–347). Judging by these two lines, it could be argued that we are dealing here with a case of male witchcraft, yet unfortunately we do not have any information at all about what his powers consist in any more than about his nature as witch. In fact, rather than a witch, he merely seems to be the passive subject through whom Agostes's witchcraft works. Let us remember that it is her who functions as the only performer of the magic events. The ballad's author gave no importance at all to the Green Knight as a figure of supernaturalness; on the contrary, his magic powers are only a reflection or expansion of those of the powerful female figure behind them. Male witches were common, especially before the fifteenth century, such as in Froissart's chronicles, in which we have the story of a man condemned for witchcraft; but this is not the case for Sir Bredbeddle, who might just be an instrument of magic, like the Green Knight in *SGGK*.

the appearance of people and things. Heidi Breuer argues that *GK* "explicitly designates 'witchcraft' as transformative, transferable power —witches like Agostes can make things appear different than they are, and they can pass their magical knowledge on to others" (2009a: 86). Shape shifting and illusion making are the most common attributes of this kind of power, which is probably one of the greatest instances of supernatural magic as it entails the radical transformation of a being into another.

In order to grasp the character of Agostes more thoroughly, we should ask what kind of witch she is. There are several types of magical figures (whose powers come from different practices and beliefs) in late medieval and early modern England. Among others, Breuer mentions occultists, herbalists, alchemists, healers, necromancers, demonologists, prophets, and sorcerers. Concerning feminine magic, three of the most common images in late Middle English literature (particularly Arthurian romance) are the witch, the sorceress, and the Loathly Lady (2009b: 9–11).[22] She argues that the

[22] Breuer's points on the representation and role of magical figures in this literary tradition are crucial for the understanding of late medieval and early modern English witches. She argues that

> whether represented negatively or positively, magical figures are by definition different from the norm; they function as others against which normative conventions can be defined. In particular, describing and interpreting the gendering of magical figures allows us to configure normative gender conventions by delineating their boundaries, those liminal spaces where humanity fades into monstrosity. (Breuer 2009b: 7)

The previous definition further emphasises the grotesque element on the character of Agostes. In the present article, I read the character of Agostes neither as negatively nor positively characterised, but I do see her as 'the Other' who (as explained above) functions as a boundary crosser. Breuer goes on to argue that "the power to transform one thing into another is so important and so rare that it demands to be treated with the utmost reverence. Transformative power is what makes magic so useful to our understanding of medieval and early modern society, precisely because of its position as other" (2009b: 7). It is Agostes's transformative powers that unquestionably render her a powerful magical figure. For more information about late medieval and early modern witchcraft in English literature, Breuer (2009b) offers a good analysis of matters such as agency, maternity, and magic in several fictional representations of witches.

"beautiful temptress' and the 'crone hag' are the two most frequent archetypes of the wicked witch in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. Most importantly, she points out that "[t]he juxtaposition of these two figures creates a construction of femininity that indicts both the overtly alluring and the grotesque" (2009: 12). Whereas Agostes would likely fit into the category of the 'crone hag', this label actually falls short for her *raison d'être* in the text, as shall be discussed right below. She is one more of the many fictional representations of witches, but not a typical one.

8. The Lady of Hutton

The Lady of Hutton's desire is strongly tied to Agostes's. Whereas the former's wish is to meet Gawain, her mother's is to make this possible. Therefore, the two desires are interconnected and both women need one another in order to succeed. However, both suddenly disappear from the plot when Sir Bredbeddle chooses to fulfil his wish to join the community of the Round Table. Consequently, the realisation of female desire proves a problematic situation: the female plot becomes secondary (a sub-text), neglected to the benefit of the male story about the Green Knight and Sir Gawain.

Still, importantly enough, the passage of the Lady of Hutton's dialogue exposes one more desire in her: she wants to save Gawain's life. In the context of the giving of the girdle, Matthews argues that

> the offer of the magical lace is made purely because of the lady's concern for Gawaine, not because of a pre-arranged conspiracy with her husband and mother, as is the implication in *Sir Gawain*. Given that the lady loves Gawaine, she would not be part of a plot involving his possible destruction. (Matthews 1994: 305)

In line with the interpretation that the Lady is seriously in love with Gawain (as she reveals) and has nothing to do with her husband's testing of the hero, there is no reason to think that she would seek to hurt the knight. In fact, judging by lines 391–401 (see quotation below), it can be inferred that the Lady wants to help him by soothing his anxiety and, what is more, saving his

life through her magic-charged white lace.[23] In my view, in this context, the Lady of Hutton comes across as the saviour of King Arthur's nephew, whereas Sir Bredbeddle becomes his potential challenger and murderer. Right after Gawain leaves Hutton Castle, the narrator employs the adjectives "gaye" as well as "curteous and sheene" (ll. 434, 440) to refer to her. Gawain accepted her lace, so the Lady's glowing happiness might be interpreted as if she was happy that Gawain, her "paramour", is going to make it out of the Greene Chappell alive.

All the interaction between the Lady of Hutton and Gawain is limited to three kisses and a very brief conversation in which she confesses her feelings for the knight.[24] Whether or not the Lady's attempt of enjoying an extra-marital relationship is frustrated is open to interpretation. When she says "Without I have the love of thee, / My life standeth in dere" (ll. 379–380), she

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[23] Even though colour symbolism is not the concern of this article and does not have much to add to my study, it is interesting to remark that Lady of Hutton's lace is white and her retinue of maidens in waiting is dressed in purple. Concerning the contrast that these two colours make, Louis Adrian Montrose (in a different context) points out:

> The change suffered by the flower —from the whiteness of milk to the purple wound of love— juxtaposes maternal nurturance and erotic violence. To an Elizabethan audience, the metamorphosis may have suggested not only the blood of defloration but also the blood of menstruation —and, perhaps, the menarche, which manifests the sexual maturity of the female, the advent of womanhood and potential motherhood. (Montrose 1983: 92)

White and purple colours are metaphorically reminiscent of two extremes of womanhood and femininity: purity and sexual intercourse. (This allegory for menstruation further harks back to the Irish hag from the *Ecthtra*-poem who, after her transformation into a lady, wears a purple mantle and has snow-white skin; Irslinger forthc.: 5–6]). Seen in this light, it seems like these two colours are suggestive of female sexuality in full bloom in the Lady of Hutton.

[24] Gerald Morgan has argued that the Lady of Hautdesert, from *SGGK*, is unhappily married to Lord Bertilak of Hautdesert (2002: 159), yet I do not find his interpretation very believable given the circumstances: she is pretending to love Gawain, as required by Morgan le Fay's machinations. In contrast, the Lady of Hutton can be seen in my view as a young woman in love who wishes to free herself temporarily from her marital and wifely duties to Sir Bredbeddle.

lets both the audience and Gawain know about the gravity of the situation: her life would be wrecked if Gawain, her paramour, refused her love.[25] To her misfortune, the knight does so out of honour and courtesy towards his host and because of the pressure under which he finds himself (ll. 381–389). However, Gawain's rejection of her love does not erase her concern for him. After Gawain's refusal,

> Then spake that Ladye gay,
> Saith, 'Tell me some of your journey;
> Your succour I may bee.
> If itt be poynt of any war,
> There shall noe man doe you noe darr
> And yee wil be governed by mee. (ll. 391–395)
>
> For heere I have a lace of silke:
> It is as white as any milke,
> And of A great value.'
> She saith, 'I dare safelye sweare
> There shall noe man doe you deere
> When you have it upon you.' (ll. 396–401)

Therefore, even though the Lady of Hutton is neglected, she does not fulfil the role of the evil temptress determined to bringing down the male protagonist. On the contrary, she operates as the only help for the knight, whether or not this also requires jeopardising Gawain's *trouthe*.[26] Her narrative role and identity are in turn closer to that of protector rather than antagonist of the hero.

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[25] This is a convention in courtly and romantic love (the medieval motif of the lovesick lady), which seems to point to the presence of some courtly love culture in the ballad.

[26] The fact that the Lady of Hutton wants to save Gawain's life out of love and respect for the honoured knight definitely establishes her difference from the Lady of Hautdesert, who turns out to be a mere seductress who offers the hero her girdle more to compromise his honour than to save his life.

9. Conclusion

In this article, I have put forward a reading of Agostes that highlights her role as a *witch sole* and renders her an independent, self-sufficient woman with a considerable degree of agency who does as she pleases in the face of prevailing social patriarchal conventions. Agostes's narrative function in the narrative is crystal clear, and she never deviates from her goal. Most importantly, she operates on her own terms, functions as a mediator among her family and Gawain, and does not live up to the portrayal of witches as anti-maternal. I believe these traits are evocative of female autonomy and construct an interesting, specific witch figure, rendering Agostes a character worthy of analysis for scholars of witchcraft.

The question of whether or not both women realise their desire is central to the present article. Whereas Agostes does her maternal duties and carries out her task, she (or, perhaps more accurately, her daughter) does not ultimately accomplish her goal. However, if bringing Gawain for her daughter in order to satisfy the Lady's amorous and/or sexual demands is all that they wanted, then they have partly succeeded. But it is hard to believe that the Lady might have been satisfied with that.

The author deprives women of the apparent notoriety that they enjoy in the text when he shifts the plot's action from Agostes's and the Lady of Hutton's actions and interests to Sir Bredbeddle's: his testing of Gawain and intention to join the community of the Knights of the Round Table. Such change has actually a negative impact on the two women: from this point afterwards, they do not appear again. However, the main authority in the ballad still resides at the top, in the character of Agostes. Louis Adrian Montrose explores the notions of gender and power in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "within a specifically Elizabethan context of cultural production [...] in which authority is everywhere invested in men — everywhere, that is, except at the top" (Montrose 1983: 61). Whereas *GK* presents several characters of outstanding agency in the Arthurian tradition (Sir Bredbeddle/the Green Knight, Sir Gawain, King Arthur), it has women at the very top. Agostes's agency might not suffice to assert that she enjoys an undisputable position of influence or control (unlike, for example, Queen Elizabeth), but I believe that her role, character, and actions make a decent role model for women, particularly mothers and witches, who try to operate unchallenged by men.

The arguments put forward in this article have sought to shed light on the witch Agostes, and hopefully I have succeeded in illuminating this unusual yet widely ignored character. I also hope that I have clarified her relationship to the rest of the characters in the ballad, particularly her daughter. Agostes stands for the archetype of the witch/ mother, a motif charged with negative connotations in medieval, modern, and contemporary popular culture (e.g. the wicked step-mother in *Cinderella*). Still, as Agostes demonstrates, a witch can also function as a vehicle for the fulfilment of good causes, such as helping one's child. Whereas she could certainly be read as an evil woman, I feel more inclined to look at her a mother who intervenes kindly in a family affair through her voice and power. Her concern for the Lady turns her into a woman who subverts the stereotype that the witch/(step-)mother is always necessarily evil. All in all, as I have demonstrated in this study, Agostes has a lot to offer to scholarship on literary representations of witches and mothers and has something that Morgan le Fay, despite the great scholarly interest that the priestess from Avalon has aroused among *SGGK*-scholars, did not offer in the enormously popular and influential fourteenth-century romance.

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received: 3 October 2017
revised version accepted: 20 March 2018