RE-DRESSING THE BOUNDARIES: THE CHALLENGE TO GENDER IDENTITY IN TWO TWELFTH-CENTURY FICTIONAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

In this article I would like to examine the way in which two modern Scottish historical novelists, Margaret Elphinstone in *Islanders*, and Simon Taylor in *Mortimer's Deep*, have examined gender through the recreation of twelfth-century communities. Each author has chosen a peripheralised geographical location which in some way represents an ideological frontier; in *Islanders* a frontier resistant to the influence of Christianity, and in *Mortimer's Deep*, the challenge of homosexual desire to the frontiers of religious doctrine. Although each novel deals with a different aspect of twelfth-century society, this article discusses the fact that in both novels temporal location is significant in terms of relocating gender identities.

The relationship between history proper and its fictional counterpart has been much debated, particularly within Scotland, in light of the achievement of the great historical novelist Sir Walter Scott, often hailed as founding father of the genre. In the years which have passed since the publication of Scott's *Waverley* in 1814, however, the genre has witnessed much development, and in the twentieth century in particular, has been seen repeatedly as providing an opportunity for writers to challenge the traditional method and perspective of historiography, through fiction.

In her 1993 publication *History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full*, Judith Zinsser relates Jacob Burkhardt's description of history as "the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another," to which she adds "the recorded is saved, and conversely, the unrecorded is lost" (17). If we take this as an accurate representation of traditional history, what was recorded was, as Zinsser argues, predominantly concerned with those who "achieved" within the male dominated political power sphere. Other indi-

viduals, such as women, homosexuals, the disabled, and the working classes, had no access, and Joy Hendry discusses this with specific reference to Scotland in her essay "Snug in the Asylum of Taciturnity: Women's History in Scotland," where she explains:

> In Scotland, the anthropologist/historian has come in with his notebook, right enough, but being a male person, he will unthinkingly record what is important according to masculine values: the affairs of state, 'intellectual' discourse, great inventions —the things obviously of public domain. (136)

One casualty of this is that the sources for history have themselves been selectively discarded by male historians who recorded the deeds of public figures, the majority of whom, until the nineteen sixties at least, were heterosexual, middle to upper class males. By historians' omissions, he or she is able to control the construction of histories which are trusted by the majority, termed by historian Peter Gay as "a convenient distortion of an equally collective amnesia" (13), and in rethinking the gendered focus of history, therefore, historians who are neither male nor heterosexual are faced with the task of carefully reconsidering the biased "half-histories" they have been taught, in order to uncover the roles of those in society hitherto buried beneath the pillars of "achievement" (to use the historically prescriptive sense of the word).

It is, nevertheless, difficult to resist the temptation to simply replace histories based around male achievers with the public achievements of history's "others." Yet this would prove false antidote, given that political power has not been exercised to the same degree by women or by openly homosexual men as it has been by the heterosexual male. There is little point in creating a type of history which Gerda Lerner refers to as "compensatory" (13), in order to validate alternative pasts, as this ignores the reality and function of actual lives. The painstaking task of retrenching what has been lost, must be undertaken, instead, by locating the snippets incidentally included in standard historical source material, and through the recovery of more personal sources such as diaries, letters and journals, so that a picture of women's lives, and of non-heterosexual lives, might be reconstructed.

In the sense that both Margaret Elphinstone's *Islanders* (1994) and Simon Taylor's *Mortimer's Deep* (1992) are well researched historical novels, it is valid to address the representation of two fictional historical communities here as contribution to the quest to reinstate lost voices. Although the novels are very different in structure and approach, both writers challenge traditional historical narratives by offering the reader an imaginatively reconstructed alternative to what is already recorded, and by recreating specific communities which are centred around historical "others" —in *Islanders*, around women, and in *Mortimer's Deep*, around a homosexual monk,— both novels present a challenge to twelfth-century Scotland; a historical epoch in which female and homosexual voices were rarely recorded.

Geographically isolated and peripheralised communities in each novel reflect the peripheralised gender identity which each author makes central. Set in Scotland at the turn of the thirteenth century, *Mortimer's Deep* is based in St Columba's Priory on Inchcolm Island. The Christian Church provides the construct against which conflict-

ing ideologies are set, and Taylor presents us with the young Duscath, whose bid to escape the rigours of accepted masculine discourse leads him to reject secular society in favour of the cloister. Duscath struggles to cope with a society which expects him to take pleasure in violence and war, and in which he finds only horror. As an apparently "over-sensitive" male, he is rejecting what Christopher Whyte has termed the "Warrior ethic":

> The polemic against traditional gender roles becomes heartfelt [...] where the warrior ethic is concerned. Military valour means violence wreaked by armed men on defenceless women [...] Duscath chooses to become a monk in order to renounce violence and as part of his overall reaction to traditional gender roles. (59)

By dissociation, Duscath identifies himself with the feminine, and he is consequently treated by his over-lord, Sir William de Mortimer, with the same subordinating sexual objectification as women often were at this time. His pursuit is "described by stereotypes that we associate with heterosexual love (conquest, surrender, the 'cruel fair,' the absence of desire in the love object), with the passive part going to the boy" (Sedgwick 4), and the description of the physical and sexual abuse he suffers is associated with stereotypically feminine sexuality. He explains:

> He ordered me to strip, then always with one hand on the dagger, he made me do vile things. He was like a wild beast slaking its thirst at a filthy pool. He had no thought for me, often hurting me, and would press his dagger up against my throat or my belly to force my compliance. I cried out for him to stop, but it only made him madder and more vicious.[1]

And indeed, in describing the issue of this type of "feminine" sexuality as follows, Catherine MacKinnon could be describing him:

> Each element of the female *gender* stereotype is revealed as, in fact, *sexual*. Vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance [...] softness means pregnability by something hard [...] Narcissism insures that woman identifies with that image of herself that man holds up. Masochism means that pleasure in violation becomes her sexuality. (530-31)

This is compounded by the fact that violation in this case does provoke Duscath's lust. He admits that during the rapes he often "stopped myself going mad by cutting myself off from my body... I could feel nothing, not even when my body answered Sir William's pleasure," which "was a great blessing, because there were times when I felt too much with Sir William, when his lust set me on fire, in spite of myself" (*MD* 53), and it is this insupportable role which he tries to leave by entering a religious community.

It may be suggested, of course, that the gender binaries of the secular world are being rejected in *Mortimer's Deep* in favour of a "woman-free" environment, but to insist that the absence of women necessarily means the absence of gender is a narrow

viewpoint, as this would suggest that each monk is in fact completely *asexual*, with no more or less manifestation of characteristics which are termed "masculine" or "feminine" than the next. Gender distinctions such as these are, however, are basic to the order of any society, and it is therefore problematic to deny the existence of gender binaries in operation within even a single sex community, particularly one with a patriarchal power structure founded on explicitly heterosexual rules.

In terms of twelfth- and thirteenth-century society, these rules basically ensured that "woman," and all that was perceived to be "feminine," was treated with suspicion. The church perpetuated the myth of Eve as Original Sinner and woman as temptress; a sin waiting to happen. The Middle Ages are renowned for their misogyny and intolerance of minorities, and as an inherently male orientated religion, it is no surprise that the growth of the Christian Church in many instances paralleled the growth of intolerance toward homosexuals as minority deviants from the masculine norm. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, "Suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality [...] is [...] a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women" (3). In other words, if what is *male* does not desire what is *female*, it is "unmanly" and by deduction, "womanly," to be treated with similar contempt.

When Duscath swims the Forth, therefore, in an effort to avoid the sexual encounters in which he has been forced to participate (albeit not entirely without pleasure), he is not swimming to a haven of self expression, but to one which, although protecting him from the pursuit of "manly offices" and the necessity of acting in a particularly "masculine" way, cannot offer him relief from the temptation of illicit sex. What the convent does offer, however, is an opportunity to transcend the sinfulness of the desire which Duscath feels. He explains: "It seemed to me a paradise, a shelter from all the storms that had raged around and within me for as long as I could remember." Yet he quickly discovers that the cherished image of spiritual love is not, in reality, trouble free, continuing "Father Edwin had not told me of the storms that could rage within the cloister and tear the tranquillity to shreds" (*MD* 60), and the reasons for the ensuing storms are varied.

The period in which the main narrative is set, between 1163 and 1219, was a time in which many changes in the sexual climate occurred. Prior to the Christian era, homosexuality (and I am consciously using contemporary terminology here) had not apparently been stigmatised in any way; in Ancient Greece it was actually seen as "unmanly" if a man did not have male lovers, and even the very early Christian church showed no particular signs of anti male-male sexual relationships. It was not until the dissolution of the Roman Empire between the third and sixth centuries AD, in fact, that hostility toward homosexual activity became noticeable, and in the centuries of upheaval which followed, the insecurity and general depression of the Western European economy compounded the problem. Many minority groups went from being accepted components of mainstream society to being oppressed for non-conformity.

Reprieve came in the tenth and eleventh centuries when the economy began to restabilize, populations of major cities multiplied dramatically, and as John Boswell puts it "the re-emergence of a distinct gay subculture in Europe was almost exactly coetaneous with the revival of major urban centres" (208). Yet this was also a period of reform for the church throughout Europe, and Western fathers of Christianity deplored erotic pleasure as an end in itself —even within wedlock.

A corrupt institution, the church relied on mainstream conformity to maintain control of the majority, and in the two hundred years from 1150-1350, changed the public perception of homosexual activity from the tolerated preference of a minority "to a dangerous, anti-social and severely sinful aberration" (Boswell 295). This was largely based on St Peter Damian's *The Book of Gomorrah*, written in 1051, which protested vigorously against sexual relationships between men, particularly monks. He states:

> Absolutely no other vice can be reasonably compared with this one, which surpasses all others in uncleanness. For this vice is in fact the death of the body, the destruction of the soul; it pollutes the flesh, extinguishes the light of the mind, casts out the Holy Spirit from the temple of the human breast, and replaces it with the devil, the rouser of lust, it removes truth utterly from the mind [...]. (Boswell 211)

And so he continues. Many members of the clergy treated Damian's tract as God's law, and this attitude is reflected in *Mortimer's Deep* by Bryce, Sub-Prior of Inchcolm, who enthuses about "The blessed Peter Damian, whose words burn with a pure, heavenly flame" (*MD* 93).

Not all clergymen agreed. The Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, famously rejected this, writing in his treatise *On Spiritual Friendship* of a kind of same sex love based on human affection as a positive Christian good, and in the novel, Father Edwin explains this to the young Duscath, assuring him that

> love, purified through prayer and time of its baser elements, will shine forth like gold and be pleasing to the Lord. It will lead you to form spiritual friendships, and spiritual friendships between two brothers or two sisters in Christ are the knots which should hold a convent together, for those who dwell in friendship dwell in God, and God in them. (*MD* 57)

This ideal, however, was already becoming unpopular at the time in which Taylor's character enters monastic life, and as a beautiful youth, he is treated as a manifestation of evil sent to tempt and destroy others in their weakness. Furthermore, Duscath, who takes the name Brother Michael, is not strong willed in spite of his good intentions, and finds little peace within the confines of the religious community. When he meets the exotic Brother Simon de Quincy, in fact, his will is entirely redundant, and he reveals his own weakness in admitting that "God could not have created a face more beautiful, and still, when I think of beauty, I think of the face of Simon de Quincy" (*MD* 151). Faced with this beauty, Michael's conscience is unable to sustain him, and as he says, "I knew I was going to be put to the test, and I knew I was going to be found wanting" (*MD* 164).

"Failing" the test, however, opens his eyes to another, more positive encoding than the total repression of sexuality demanded by the Church. In Rome, he and Simon become lovers, and as he explains to Simon's son years later, neither Simon's behaviour, nor the condemnation of the church, can alter the genuine beauty within their relationship:

> My story with Simon, it seems to me now, started in that warm, bright room, surrounded by obscenities. It was a long, dark, sorry story. Yet that room shines for me as bright as the brightest star, in a world of its own, high above shame and sin. What happened in that room was wonderful, despite all the evil that flowed around and from it. Even when I stand before God on Doomsday I will not retract that, I could not retract that, without blackening my soul with perjury. (*MD* 169)

His "story" with Simon challenges the heart of the patriarchy which he finds himself in opposition to in sexual terms; apparent sexual "deviancy," becomes "right," and although Simon's view of life is against all Michael believes in, he argues against Michael's Christian guilt by making positive recourse to the naturalness of sexual feeling between those of the same sex, at a time when Christian doctrine referred to sodomy as "that incontinence against nature" (*MD* 92). He argues that "everyone has their own nature," and that

> [f]or good or for evil... the fact remains that most men feel lust for women, and most women, I assume, feel it for men. Not all, however, and this is my point: there are men who feel it for men, and women who feel it for women, for that is their nature. (*MD* 176)

This allows Michael to evaluate an alternative encoding which pushes back the boundaries of acceptable discourse, and challenges the standard views of his twelfth-century situation.

Simon represents paganism, and through the horror this presents to Michael, he also glimpses an absence of guilt, and an acceptance he desperately desires; a relationship between beauty and goodness in place of condemnation. Simon symbolises the world as it was before sex was considered as grave a sin as murder, and looking at the Greek statues in Rome, Michael admits:

> These pagans knew no shame, but how was it that the shame of our first mother and father did not touch them? They must have been utterly savage and close to the beasts. Yet if that was so how could they have created such perfection? Whoever had created these statues knew no shame, but neither, surely, had they known poverty, ugliness, squalor. (*MD* 166)

In this way, Simon promotes a positive image of homosexuality, linked in twelfth-century terms to pre-Christian paganism, and equally unrelated to stereotyped images of physical weakness and effeminacy. Yet he is not a sympathetic character. Clever and power-hungry, his treatment of Michael, and of another of his lovers, Lawrence, whom he murders, does not encourage the reader to identify him as a likely ambassador for a silent minority. Nevertheless, his function in the novel is not limited to questions of sexuality, and is tied in closely with the wider politics of a Catholic Church which he exposes to Michael in all its corruption:

> Greed is the very ground on which our Mother Church has built her house, the tree in which she has made her nest. Therefore to shout against greed is to

> shake her very foundations and to destroy herself. That is against nature, no matter what reason and virtue demand.
> Against earthly love, however, she screams, loud and shrill, in the hope that no one will notice the true corruption in which she sits and stinks. (*MD* 177)

What this quest for power exposes incidentally, therefore, is that whilst personal sin is attacked publicly, this is used only as a smokescreen for social sin and ecclesiastical corruption. On a sexual level, hypocrisy is never more pointed than in the painted chamber in Rome. Michael struggles to obey his seniors, whilst unwittingly providing the entertainment for Simon's religious master, a very senior church figure. Simon tells him,

> Every moment we spent in each other's arms he has shared, for he was there, quietly watching and enjoying. His body is weak for his heart is not well, and so he uses my body and my heart... My master usually gets what he wants, because he has so much that other people want: he has power. (*MD* 185)

It may seem less surprising, given Simon's amoral nature, that it is not with him but with another monk, Edgar, that Michael finally moves beyond the idea of physical love as "right" or "wrong." Initially, Edgar is unwilling to face his desire, leaving Michael to feel "as if part of my soul had died" (*MD* 122), as where his relationship with Simon is a product of the need to love, the eventual consummation of his feeling for Edgar is transmuted by a love so pure that it need not be compared to God, or to the moral structure centred around Him. Michael explains: "In Rome Simon and I had been animals, drunk on animal pleasure; but pure and perfect love now transformed Edgar and me into angels, and those brief moments into eternity," an act for which "I did not feel the need to confess, as I did not feel that we had sinned" (*MD* 225-6). Edgar alone can make him happy, because their love requires no sanction, and this is the ultimate freedom; peripheralised sexuality becomes central.

In focusing on the edge of society both geographically and sexually, Taylor challenges the boundaries of Christianity by drawing both the isolated Scottish religious community, and the existence of homosexuality, into the centre, although of course he cannot realistically provide Michael with a twelfth-century society, either peripheral or mainstream, which accepts his sexual desire. Michael and Edgar do not live happily ever after, and in this same way, Margaret Elphinstone cannot solve the structural problems which twelfth-century Fair Isle offers her female characters.

In *Islanders*, the society Elphinstone has chosen is both geographically and temporally significant. Due to its isolated position between Orkney and Shetland, Fair Isle finds itself on the periphery both of Old Norse civilisation, and of medieval Christendom. Although most of the Scandinavian settlers in the British Isles had become Christian by the twelfth century, less densely populated areas took longer to convert from paganism (Jesch 36), and although the Fair Isle inhabitants in the novel call themselves Christians, they have had very little real exposure to Christianity; their prayers continue to include remnants of the old pagan culture.

Fair Isle —or Friðarey to use its Norse name— therefore, is ideologically significant as an outward boundary of two ideologies, each of which offers a gender code

governing women's lives in different ways. As Jenny Jochens states: "the impact of Christianity on the female half of the human race [is] one of the most controversial issues in women's history" (*Women* 2), and Elphinstone herself is interested in the fact that "As Southern victims of Viking raiders, we only experience the war, rape and pillage of pirates, none of whom were women."[2] Indeed, very little can be deduced about the mothers and wives of these men from the blend of history and myth inherent in the sagas, which provide us with the bulk of our knowledge of Old Norse society. She explains:

> I think certainly with the Vikings, you read the historical accounts and they occasionally give you an account of brooches that have been dug up and you think, 'oh, they were worn by a woman, they existed.' But you'd think from historians that the Vikings were a society that was 99% male and obviously it wasn't, *so I thought about rewriting that history, going back and filling in the gaps between the very fragmented evidence we have*. (Babinec 56, emphasis added)

The story of the ordinary women's lives in the twelfth century has been made anonymous, and with this "rewriting" of history, Elphinstone attempts to bring them to life, challenging through fictional reconstruction the traditionally male histories of Old Norse society. Most of the subject matter of sagas and Skaldic poetry in Old Norse literature is phallocentric, including women more generally as goddesses or witch figures than real people (Jochens, *Old* 105), and we must assume that this reflects the mindset of a people steeped in this oral culture. The culture Elphinstone has chosen, therefore, is one which was recognisably structured by a governing patriarchy, and she was interested in subverting this by exploring the possibilities for women.

Nevertheless, *Islanders* does not simply create an island society of women. Men are as much a part of the social make-up as their wives and daughters. What Elphinstone focuses on, however, is the female experience of this community, and she examines through fiction the various strategies of resistance women employ, in order to withstand the repression enforced upon them by what is effectively a male dominated society.

This twelfth-century world is envisaged for the reader by Astrid, only survivor of the shipwreck which brings her to Fair Isle. An alien within this isolated community, she observes it, as does the reader, through new eyes. As a Christian, she is partially resistant to its different and frightening religious and moral code. Most significantly, however, these new eyes view Fair Isle society from a specifically female perspective.

For Astrid, the journey to the outward boundaries of Christian civilisation represented by her shipwreck, is in a way symbolic of the peripheralisation of her gender as a valid historical perspective. Interestingly, however, this periphery becomes the centre, and reinforcing the dual notion of island as both periphery and centre, the opening page of the novel presents us with a map which locates the rest of Europe from the perspective of Fair Islanders at the centre of the earth. By coming into that centre, Astrid in turn brings history in the wider sense into the female realm, and a new history is attempted in which Astrid's voice meets other female voices in a subversion of male centred historiography.

Fair Isle has its patriarchy, but due to the island's relative isolation this is not a rigid code, and for every area of male authority we are shown a situation in which women attempt a degree of control. Friðarey translates as "truce isle" in *The Orkneyinga Saga* (Thom 7), and this is intrinsic to the island's role in the narrative. Astrid leaves behind her a society in Dublin in which Christianity has been fully embraced, yet she quickly finds her own religious conviction challenged by the unorthodox nature of this fledgling Christian outpost. Although nominally Catholic, Fair Islanders view the new religion as a set of beliefs which they have been instructed to follow, rather than as a way of thinking. This is initially alarming to Astrid, yet is shown to be positive to a degree, as isolated from the rest of the world, women experience two ideologies, and combine the elements of each which offer them most freedom and empowerment.

In spite of the relative adversity experienced by the community in *Islanders*, Elphinstone's female characters are spirited, and this is reinforced by their positioning at the centre of the novel. Few willingly accept their stifled lives, subtly thwarting convention to create diversions and encodings for themselves which are not socially sanctioned, and thus reveal the strategies of empowerment and resistance in operation beneath a deeply patriarchal social exterior. Astrid is the first of many female voices in the text who challenge accepted notions of behaviour with her strength and self reliance, and in some ways this isolated island turns out to enjoy a more liberal female discourse than the fully converted and supposedly more civilised Christian south.

Nonetheless, this is the twelfth century, therefore, although the islanders take for granted a "natural equality" (Gifford 607) maintained by their isolation from outside influence, Friðarey women are constrained by a traditional framework which makes it impossible for them to leave the island as the men do, thus denying them the opportunity for adventure and new experience. Instead, they are expected to marry, a key issue when examining the lives of Old Norse women, as one of the hallmarks of pagan society was that women were married as part of a commercial contract, arranged between the groom and the bride's father with no consideration for the woman's approval —and even at times without her knowledge.

One of the positive hallmarks of Christian marriage, on the other hand, was the doctrine of female consent, and marriage did become less of a contract and more a bond of mystical union as it moved away from paganism. Although this factor obviously worked in favour of women theoretically, however, Christian churchmen widened the pagan prohibitions against incest, extending the circle of those who could not marry to a vast network of relatives and friends. In a society as small as Fair Isle, these prohibitions obviously further reduced women's freedom, and among the unmarried girls in the novel, Ingrid and Ragna face problems in trying to achieve fulfilment from this, the only channel open to them:

> 'The problem is,' remarked Ingrid peaceably, 'there isn't anybody. Not eligible to marry anyway. Not on the island.' She turned to Ragna. 'Seriously, you must have thought about that?'
> 'Have I not? And yet they blame my brother for bringing in more men.
> Well, what do they want? There are only about three men on this island who aren't fourth cousins or something closer. So what happens? They go away to sea and marry. And where do we end up?'[3]

As women, their choices are already limited, and even marriage it seems, is not a dependable source of movement and change, yet Ingrid actively pursues change by making sure she gets pregnant to an outsider at the first opportunity, by way of procuring some form of freedom. By employing a tactic traditionally cast as imprisoning, she successfully manipulates her father here, who disapproves of her choice, but must hastily arrange the marriage of a pregnant daughter lest she disgrace the honour of the family.

The orphaned Astrid, however, is furious to find that the decision to marry is not her own, revealing the inability of the Christian church to completely eradicate pagan disregard for female consent, and for all her protest she is quickly forced to accept that without a dowry she has nothing to bargain with. Initially, she sees leaving Fair Isle as her only chance of freedom, believing that finding her family will give her time to reflect and choose. Eventually travelling away from the island, however, she finds that for a woman, geographical freedom is illusory, and her betrothal to the islander Thorvald is the best that fate allows:

> She wasn't sure now why she'd been so furious... Wherever she went, she would have to accept authority from someone else. She'd never fully understood that before. If Kol had lived to arrange her marriage, he'd certainly have asked her opinion, but no one else was going to care that much. Astrid began to realise for the first time how powerless her orphaned condition had left her. (*I* 280)

Of the older islanders, Ingebjorg, whose name comes from the fertility god '*Ing*' + '*borg*,' meaning fortification, is a touchstone in a way for Astrid, as she is the only other woman who is not native to Fair Isle, and who understands the alarming prospect of remaining there forever. A strong character, she contravenes expectation in refusing to live with her husband's brothers when he dies, and in defence of her rights to raise her sons alone, brings the matter before the island Thing in a strike for independence which provokes a mixed reaction. Her niece Gudrun complains, "You'd think after Eirik died Ingebjorg would have the decency not to quarrel with his family" (*I* 33), reinforcing the assumption that families should be headed by men. The word "decency" implies that Gudrun views Ingebjorg's strength as indecent or unfeminine in a woman: "for a woman to take the matter to the Thing! It was a family matter and she should never have opposed her husband's brothers in public" (*I* 34), yet Ingebjorg has simply used her landowning rights to maintain control of her life, a step unwelcome to her husband's family.

Her friend Gunnhild is also non-conformist, having a lover for years despite her marriage. Comprised of '*gunnr*,' meaning 'strife' + '*hildr*,' meaning 'battle,' Gunnhild was the name of a favourite hate-figure in Norse mythology, accused of witchcraft and adultery. Elphinstone, therefore, has chosen the name specifically, although she does not invite us to judge her character's activities, reversing the standard gender divisions which required women to be monogamous. Here, as elsewhere, Elphinstone attempts to give her characters the voice they might have had, and reflects what she hopes would have been a realistic conversation between friends in which Gunnhild tells Ingebjorg that she prefers sex with her lover because he is better at it than her husband!

In women's conversation throughout *Islanders*, in fact, we are given a sense of communality which goes some way to resist the dual influences of Christian and pagan that negatively affect their lives, and we are presented with a community in which it becomes obvious that the main agents of social organisation are women.

This necessarily operates beneath the surface of the patriarchal framework, however, and in many cases resistance is difficult. Immediately, for example, Astrid's orphaned condition leaves her dependent on kindness, and divests her of any power to control her destiny; therefore although she is the only actively practising convert to Christianity in the novel, a religion intended to eschew the "progress" of the medieval world from paganism to salvation, her fate remains dependent on men. She is vulnerable to sexual abuse, as physical ownership of a woman by her guardian was widely accepted in all societies where "women were highly valued for their sexual and reproductive services" (Jochens, *Women* 86). The only fortunate aspect, therefore, is that at thirteen Astrid is considered too young to be claimed as a sexual slave, and she reasons that "[i]f being a child would save her from what they did to women, a child she would remain" (*I* 21).

Christian doctrine was not solely responsible for this, of course. Pagan society, based on the acquisition of wealth, was similarly deeply patriarchal:

> Among the warrior peoples the acquisition of wealth became a powerful factor depressing the position of women. For the spoils of war, won through the sweat of battle, could hardly belong other than to men. (Ackworth 32)

Yet what paganism did offer women, was the chance to take some control of their own lives. Fate was still left to the gods, but there were ways of averting their wrath, and most importantly, women could still feel as though they exercised some control over destiny. They did not have to yield their lives up to a single male God, and in the novel, the first Christian priest to come to the island condemns Gunnhild's pagan use of herbs and charms to protect herself as witchcraft, at which she muses:

> Life's not so simple that you can tell the same story to everyone. Each of us has many stories, they're all true, but we have to tell the right one to the right person. There's no use pretending that there's only one tale which takes account of everything. (*I* 408)

In *Islanders* Elphinstone constructs a patriarchal community presented from a predominantly female perspective. All accept the framework to be what it is, and Norse or Christian, this is essentially patriarchal. Nevertheless as we study the underlying dynamics of the society, we see that women control their own lives to the best of their ability, presenting stories from different angles as the occasion demands. They cannot alter the basic gender divisions which prevent Astrid from becoming a ship builder's apprentice, but to an extent they are able to employ strategies of resistance, subverting the traditional histories of Old Norse society.

As with Taylor, Elphinstone is not suggesting that history's "others" are completely validated in terms of the patriarchies in which they operate. Both writers are too concerned with historical detail. Each fictional recreation, however, does go some

way to reconstructing history by deconstructing standard historical narratives, in Taylor's case in his examination of homosexuality, and in Elphinstone's, by placing women at the centre of historical discourse. Both novels therefore provide, through the use of fiction, a means of articulating those who have previously been silenced by history.

Notes

[1] All references are to Simon Taylor *Mortimer's Deep* (Balnain Books, Nairn 1992), abbreviated as *MD*.

[2] From an unpublished interview with Margaret Elphinstone. Amanda J. McLeod. Germersheim, 1998.

[3] All references are to Margaret Elphinstone, *Islanders* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), abbreviated as *I*.

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