

## The Queen's Fantastic Body

*A Comparative Study of the Mythologization of Empress Wu Zetian and Eleanor of Aquitaine*

**ABSTRACT** Ernst H. Kantorowicz, in his seminal work *The King's Two Bodies*, argues that a sovereign has two bodies: one mortal, physical body subject to illness and death, and another immortal, dynastic body equivalent to the administrative mechanism. Notably, it is the *king* who has two bodies, not the queen. The king's dynastic body is his administrative persona, but the queen's official body depends on her maternity for the continuation of the dynasty. This essay argues that a queen *can* have two bodies and explores female rulers' ways of claiming the rhetorical doubling of a sovereign body independent of maternity. It also proposes a comparative approach. This essay reads the mythological representation of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204) in Marie de France's Arthurian tale *Lanval* against Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705)'s self-mythologization as the avatar of the Goddess of Pure Radiance in the *Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*. It illustrates how female rulers wielded political symbolism through a reshuffling of symbolic orders, which provides a window into the roles of Celtic myths in a medieval French Christian society and Buddhism in a medieval Chinese Confucian society. **KEYWORDS** the Queen's Two Bodies; Empress Wu; Eleanor of Aquitaine; Marie de France; *Lanval*; *Commentary on the Meanings of the Prophecies about the Divine Sovereign in the Great Cloud Sutra* (dayunjing shenhuang shouji yishu 大雲經神皇授記義疏)

Ernst H. Kantorowicz, in his seminal work *The King's Two Bodies*, argues that a sovereign has two bodies: one mortal, physical body subject to illness and death, and another immortal, dynastic body equivalent to the administrative mechanism.<sup>1</sup> Notably, it is the *king* who has two bodies, not the queen. Peggy McCracken highlights the difficulty a queen faces in claiming the rhetorical doubling of a sovereign body: “Unlike the king, whose corporeal body may be separate from the transcendent, immortal body of the sovereign, the queen's role is uniquely corporeal and any symbolic use of her office depends precisely on the maternal body.”<sup>2</sup> The king's dynastic body is his administrative persona, but when a queen is seen as having an official body, it is nearly always because of her ability to produce an heir to the throne. Therefore, when a female ruler requires legitimation that does not depend on her maternity, effort must be expended to construct a dynastic body that is separate from her physical body.

Untying the knot between masculinity and sovereignty is a thankless task, and I will not attempt it here. Instead, I suggest a rediscovery and reactivation of latent symbolic undercurrents, an approach that will reveal counterforces that qualify the primary

1. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (originally published in 1957, Princeton: Princeton University Press, reprinted 2017).

2. See Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 40.

worldview. For instance, in twelfth-century Anglo-Norman England, the primary symbolic order gave prominence to Christianity (King Arthur's court, held at Pentecost), male homosocial bonding (the Order of the Round Table), class distinctions (the mobile chevalier, along with the practice of chivalry), nationality (British), and material wealth and landholding (vassalage and primogeniture).<sup>3</sup> Celtic mythology, transmitted via Brittany in France back to England, provided a repertoire of magic, femininity, and wonderlands in Arthurian tales and imagined an otherworldly rule embodied in a fantastic body of the fairy lady. Likewise, in seventh-century China, the primary worldview, Confucianism, valorized the polarity of sexes and firmly dismissed female rule, but Buddhism, the oldest foreign religion localized in China since the third century BCE, considered all bodies as manifestations and created room to imagine de-gendered dynastic bodies.

This essay reads the mythological representation of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204) in Marie de France's *Lanval* against Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705)'s self-mythologization as the avatar of the Goddess of Pure Radiance in the *Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*. It illustrates how the queens fashioned themselves ideologically through a rearrangement of symbolic orders. Though these two pieces are far apart in genre—one an imaginative *lai* and the other a commentary on a canonical Buddhist sutra—the methodology of their mythologization is comparable: their authors tap marginalized resources in their respective cultural settings to construct transcendental bodies out of otherwise absolutely carnal female bodies in an effort to justify the queens' precarious reigns.

Before the two queens ascended to power (Eleanor as a surrogate sovereign in Richard I's absence from 1189 to 1199 and Empress Wu's seizure of the throne in 690, after she exiled her son, the legitimate heir to the throne), both were villainized because of their personal history.<sup>4</sup> Though Eleanor was never formally charged with adultery, so many rumors of her incestuous passion for her uncle Raymond of Poitiers, Prince of Antioch, accumulated around her that the Bishop of Langres proposed an inquiry when Eleanor attempted to divorce her first husband Louis VII.<sup>5</sup> The story was told with more and more vehemence and some chroniclers transformed it into accounts of the queen's affair with a Muslim sultan during the Second Crusade.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, Empress Wu was considered even more hideous by chroniclers and contemporary rebels as a murderous woman highly adept at palace intrigue. In her early years, Wu served in the harem of her first husband Emperor Taizong 太宗 [r. 626–49] as a low-ranking concubine and

3. For a summary of the primary symbolic order in Arthurian legends, see Jane Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women*, New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 45.

4. See Peggy McCracken, "Scandalizing Desire: Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Chroniclers," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 247–64. For the basic trajectory of Empress Wu's rise to power and the fate of the female leaders who followed her, see Rebecca Doran, *Transgressive Typologies: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 103 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), 4–7.

5. James A. Brundage, "The Canon Law of Divorce in the Mid-twelfth Century: Louis VII c. Eleanor of Aquitaine," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 213–22, at 218.

6. McCracken, "Scandalizing Desire," 248–50.

followed the norms to become a Buddhist nun after the emperor's death. Right in the covenant where she was cloistered to honor the death of her first husband, she seduced his son, Emperor Gaozong 高宗 [r. 649–83], who was soon to be her second husband. After her return to the court, she allegedly killed her own daughter to frame the empress in order to supplant her and ruthlessly mutilated her before her execution. These scandals denied both Eleanor and Empress Wu access to the conventional and respectable queenly images,<sup>7</sup> not to mention legitimacy as sovereigns.

Not all queens are comparable. Empress Wu was the sole officially recognized empress regnant of China in more than two millennia. The English counterparts that immediately come to mind are Mary Tudor and Queen Elizabeth I of England, the earliest officially recognized female sovereigns of England. However, in terms of symbolic representation, Empress Wu was never interested in desexualizing her body as the virgin queen Elizabeth did. As for dynastic continuity, Empress Wu created a breakage in the Tang dynasty,<sup>8</sup> but she did not have to tackle the reshuffling of religious symbols as did Mary and Elizabeth, who navigated the currents of Protestantism and Catholicism in the post-Reformation turmoil. True, Empress Wu's revival of Buddhism reversed the Taoist precedence over Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, but the symbolic integrity of the Confucian-Taoist-Buddhist system remained intact.<sup>9</sup>

What makes Empress Wu and Eleanor of Aquitaine comparable is not only their unconventional female rule that endangered dynastic succession, but also the fact that the two queens fostered symbolic representations of themselves that qualify the primary worldview. Empress Wu and her Buddhist propagandists, led by her monk lover Xue Huaiyi (薛懷義), mounted a well-orchestrated collective effort to identify Wu with Devi Jinguang<sup>10</sup> (淨光天女, Skt. Vimalaprabha, Goddess of Pure Radiance), whom *the Great Cloud Sutra* prophesies will be reincarnated as an ideal universal monarch (*zhuanlunwang* 轉輪王, skt. *cakravartin*) with a female body. The monks produced the *Commentary on the Meanings of the Prophecies about the Divine Sovereign in the Great Cloud Sutra* (*dayunjing shenhuang shouji yishu* 大雲經神皇授記義疏) to legitimize Wu's rule.<sup>11</sup>

7. See Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, 23–65, for conventional moral paragons of exemplary queens and a transgressive typology of condemned female rulers in medieval China.

8. Wu took over the throne from her second husband, Emperor Gaozong of Tang (who ruled from 649 to 683, though after 665 much of the governance was in the hands of Empress Wu) and exiled their son in order to build her own dynasty Zhou (周, 684–705), which interrupted the Tang dynasty (唐, 618–907).

9. See R. Guisso, “The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tung (684–712),” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3., ed. Denis C. Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 290–332, at 311.

10. Referred to as the “Goddess of Pure Radiance” in what follows.

11. For the manuscript information of the *Commentary on the Meanings of the Prophecies about the Divine Sovereign in the Great Cloud Sutra*, see Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Function of the Dunhuang Document S. 6502 Followed by an Annotated Translation*, 2nd ed. (originally published 1976, Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2005). See also Norman H. Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 209–26. On the politics of the translation and circulation of Empress Wu's Buddhist propaganda through Indian and Korean monks, see Daniel Boucher, “Translation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature*, ed. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-Yee Li, and Xiaofei Tian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 494–506, at 503–04.

Likewise, Eleanor of Aquitaine had an abiding interest in symbolism which incorporated Celtic mythology into Arthurian tales. Although she was never an officially recognized sovereign in her own right, she patronized works of courtly love (*fin'amor*) with the aim of nuancing the queen's public role. M. A. Pappano argues for a historical connection between Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Fairy Lady in Marie de France's lai *Lanval*.<sup>12</sup> In the *lai*, the Fairy Lady offers love and wealth to the neglected foreign knight Lanval in King Arthur's court on condition that he never reveal her. The knight's increasing wealth and popularity in the court attract Queen Guinevere's attention. To repel her advances, Lanval proclaims that he has a lover who is superior to Guinevere. Guinevere embroils Lanval in a legal dispute until the Fairy Lady enters the court and spirits him away to the fairy land of Avalon. The Celtic origins of the Fairy Lady and her otherworldly power have generated a number of scholarly works on this *lai*.<sup>13</sup> Pappano notes that "the fairy lady is unnamed and unidentified with nation, but her excessive wealth, above that of any king or emperor, links her to Eleanor, whose lands made her the richest heiress in western Europe."<sup>14</sup>

Despite their energetic reconstruction of symbolic orders, moral ambiguity haunts both Empress Wu and Eleanor. Chen Yinque (陳寅恪, 1890–1969), one of the ground-breaking historians of twentieth-century China, in his foundational article "Empress Wu and Buddhism" (*Wuzhao yu Fojiao* 武曩與佛教), argues that Buddhism offers an alternative discourse that justifies rulers who are villainized in Confucianism.<sup>15</sup> Chen juxtaposes Empress Wu with the notorious tyrant Emperor Yang of Sui (隋煬帝, 569–618), from whom Empress Wu's mother was descended. Buddhism excused both Emperor Yang of Sui and Empress Wu, the former a murderer of his father and the latter a transgressive woman usurper. In contrast, both were unambiguously condemned in Confucianism. Buddhism justified Emperor Yang of Sui's patricide by portraying it as the result of karma from previous states of existence<sup>16</sup> and characterized Empress Wu's female body as an expedient manifestation used to convert the masses (為化眾生故, 現受女身, 當知乃是方便之身, 非實女身),<sup>17</sup> as predicted in *the Great Cloud Sutra*. Likewise, Pappano argues that Eleanor of Aquitaine is represented in *Lanval* as Guinevere and the Fairy Lady rolled into one. The two characters represent the two sides of the queen, one with uncontainable desires, the other with infinite power to accommodate the desires of both Lanval and herself; one demands, one gives; one is native, one foreign. In

12. M. A. Pappano, "Marie de France, Aliénor d'Aquitaine, and the Alien Queen," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 337–68.

13. On the Fairy Lady's Celtic origins, see Bernard Sergent, *L'origine Celtique Des Lais De Marie De France*, Publications Romanes Et Françaises 261 (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2014), 137–40. See also Robert McCain, "Encountering the Marvelous in Marie De France" (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 2012), 24. See also Chance, *Literary Subversions*, 19.

14. Pappano, "the Alien Queen," 354.

15. Chen, Yinque 陳寅恪, "Empress Wu Zhao and Buddhism"(武曩與佛教), in Chen Yinque Xiansheng Quanji 陳寅恪先生全集 (Taipei: Li Ren Shu Ju 里仁書局, 1979), 421–36.

16. Chen, 427.

17. *The Great Cloud Sutra*, Juan (Chapter) 6, *Dafangdeng Wuxiang Jing* (T. 0387) 12.1107a02–03.

this case, like Buddhism, Celtic mythology nuances the queen's image and makes her morality ambiguous.

Even if Buddhism and Celtic mythology qualified the primary Confucian and Christian worldviews, there are three major obstacles to constructing a queen's immortal body: (1) the reports of unruly sexual desires that created a scandal by portraying the female ruler as a disruptor of both the cosmological order and institutional dispensation; (2) the mismatch between the queen's military prowess and her physically weaker gender, which was especially important in times when territorial control and political boundaries related to feudal duties were major concerns in both kingdoms; (3) the loose connection between the queen's female body and landowning. In what follows, I address these three obstacles in three sections. Buddhist and Celtic reconstructions give rise to the queens' fantastic (meaning both fabulous and fantasy-based) bodies, and I examine whether these unconventional discourses successfully redress the potential imbalance between the female rulers' physical bodies and their reimagined immortal bodies. With regard to historical contexts, this essay does not cover every aspect of Eleanor's and Wu's prolonged reigns; instead, it focuses on events closely related to the two texts in question. I read *Lanval* as a reflection on Eleanor's role during Richard's absence, especially in the 1190s, and the *Commentary* on the *Great Cloud Sutra* as a justification of Wu's administrative maneuvers before she ascended to the throne in 690. This essay attempts to find a common pattern in the resurrection of cultural undercurrents to legitimize rulers when the primary worldview denies their legitimacy.

#### FROM SCANDALIZED BODY TO MILITARIZED BODY

Because of the maternal and life-affirming characteristics attached to the queen's physical body, a feminine embodiment of military aggression, conquest, and destruction is counterintuitive in both Confucianism and Christianity. However, historical facts forced the writers and courtiers to symbolically de-scandalize the queens' "unnatural" prowess: Empress Wu crushed a number of military coups within the country and defended its western borders from attacks by Tibetans and Turks. Eleanor's military leadership in the Second Crusade (1147–49) also attracted many historians' attention. She, like an Amazonian woman, led armies and was reported to have donned man's attire and exposed one breast in the fight. Though historians often blamed Eleanor for "capriciously interfering with military orders to satisfy her own whims" and held her accountable for the debacle at Cadmos Mountain, these accusations were proved ungrounded by Curtis H. Walker.<sup>18</sup> In addition, she also maintained the balance of power during Richard I's imprisonment in Germany. In 1193, this balance was almost disrupted by the conflict between William

18. See Curtis H. Walker, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Disaster at Cadmos Mountain on the Second Crusade," *The American Historical Review* 55.4 (1950): 857–61, at 860. Walker examines the differences in two historical sources for the story of the disaster at Cadmos, one eyewitness account by a monk Odo de Deuil and the other a chronicle by William, archbishop of Tyre, and concludes that Eleanor cannot be responsible for moving the column too far ahead. The misconception of her character, over-romanticized by minstrel, balladmonger, and biographers, misled historians into incorporating fantastic elements in their works.

Longchamp, the ambitious but incapable foreigner left by Richard to govern the country in his absence; Prince (later King) John, the youngest brother of Richard; and Walter of Coutances, a mediator sent by Richard during his captivity to secure a peace between William Longchamp and John. Reading these political maneuverings into the *Commentary* and the *lai* will help clarify how secondary symbolic systems were used to justify the queens' "unnatural" aggression.

One insurrection against Empress Wu happened immediately before she officially proclaimed herself empress in 690. In response to the discovery of Bao Tu 寶圖 (Precious Diagram) in the Luo River in 688, an important augury that prophesied that a sage mother would come to power, she invited the Tang princes to the ceremony to venerate the omen and celebrate the opening of the royal building Ming Tang 明堂 (Bright Hall). The Tang princes saw the invitation as a death trap, but a mass refusal to attend would have been equivalent to an open rebellion. A number of princes saw no middle ground and opted for an insurrection. An over-hasty levy of troops caused the rebellion to melt away before the imperial troops arrived on the scene. This uprising was the last internal resistance to the Empress, although her prolonged purge and persecution campaign lasted until 691.<sup>19</sup> The central espionage system and secret police rippled out from the court, eradicating rebellious princes, upper aristocratic families, and scholar-officials until 697.<sup>20</sup> But despite her decisive persecution of dissenters, Wu's rule was *not* a reign of terror. Her spy network ruthlessly eradicated rebels against the empress herself, but she maintained a high degree of receptivity to ministerial remonstrance against the imperial prerogative. In addition, among her administrative reforms, she executed the Acts of Grace in 689 to remit tax debts in response to the fiscal problems caused by famine, Turkish invasions, and expenses associated with the construction of the Bright Hall. Wu's administrative talents, however, were still not enough to justify her unprecedented female rule.

A popular anti-Wu polemic by Luo Binwang (駱賓王), which was widely circulated in support of a rebellion in 678 shortly after Wu deposed her son upon her husband's death, villainized Wu's femininity, especially sexuality, and made it almost impossible for her to claim a rhetorical doubling of a sovereign body. Luo's propagandist piece "Call to Arms against Wu Zhao in Support of Xu Jingye" (*wei Xu Jingye tao Wu Zhao xi* 為徐敬業討武曩檄) entered the classical Chinese canon as an exemplary piece that mobilized loyalists and rallied troops to forestall an impending seizure of power by an illegitimate would-be ruler. It stands out among canonical classical Chinese declarations of war as a heavily gendered piece: the scandalized discourse dwells on Wu's hyper-sexuality and metaphorizes her physical body as a combination of several forms of bestial bodies. The piece starts by noting Wu's obscure birth and her personal history of having served as a concubine in the harem of two emperors who were father and son. It goes on to describe how, through courtly conspiracies, she murdered the previous empress, took over the governance from her husband, and deposed her son:

19. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu," 303.

20. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu," 294–99.

She then stole the pheasant regalia of the previous empress and entrapped our ruler into an incestuous relationship by imitating a doe shared by father and son stags. And then with a heart of a serpent and the nature of a wolf, she favored evil sycophants and brutalized loyal and righteous officials. She killed her own children, butchered her elder brothers, murdered the ruler, poisoned her mother. The gods and men alike hate her; neither heaven nor earth can bear her. Yet she still harbors evil intentions, and plans to steal the sacred regalia of the ruler. She sequestered the beloved sons of the ruler in an isolated place and assigned her own alliance of bandits to the most important offices of state.<sup>21</sup>

The villainizing rhetoric draws on a sequence of animal imagery to emphasize Wu's self-destructive desires and anti-natural disruption of the cosmic order. Luo reads many aspects of rapacious animals into Wu, as if wild beasts were invading the court through her body. This use of imagery not only disconnects the queen's physical body from her dynastic body, but also aligns her body with bestial bodies. All the members in the court, including the two generations of emperors, were reduced to animals when they chose to keep her in the harem. She transfigured her maternal body into a wifely body for her second husband and manipulated the ruler to persecute the righteous courtiers. Notably, this shortened biography first confines Wu to the private space of the harem and then, with a preponderance of terms related to "intimacy" and "playing favorites," diminishes her political maneuverings in the public realm by implying that they are an extension of her womanly manipulations in the bedchamber.

In contrast to his depiction of her bestiality and secrecy, Luo glorifies the rebels' efforts to eradicate the monster (以清妖孽) by invoking the cosmological imagery traditionally used to describe a legitimate male ruler's body. After a biography portraying Xu, the leader of the rebels, as a loyalist, Luo gives a cosmological response to the insurrection:

Down south where the three Yue ethnic groups live and up to the north where the three counties near the capital are located, cavalry formed in groups and chariots connected their jade hubs. The grain in the barns of the Hailing are inexhaustible; the royal flags along the Yangtze River indicate a successful restoration of legitimate rule. The neighing of the warhorses arouses the north wind; the brightness of the clashing blades eclipses the constellation Sagittarius. The soldiers' raging roar could topple a mountain; their powerful rebukes could change the colors of the wind and clouds.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to Wu's courtly confinement and womanly ploys of stealing and poisoning, the sweeping geography of mainland China from south to north exudes masculine power. The cosmos responds to the collective body of the armed forces through wind, stars, mountains, and clouds. The restoration of the deposed prince is a reestablishment of the cosmological order. Wu's violence is anti-natural and bestial, but the rebels' rectifying

21. 踐元后於羣翟，陷吾君於聚麀。加以虺蜴為心，豺狼成性。近狎邪僻，殘害忠良。殺姊屠兄，弑君鳩母。人神之所同嫉，天地之所不容。猶復包藏禍心，窺竊神器。君之愛子，幽在別宮。賊之宗盟，委以重任。The full text of Luo Binwang is in *Qin Ding Quan Tang Wen* (欽定全唐文), imperial edition, 1814, reprinted in facsimile (Taipei: Wen you shu dian, 1972), Juan 199. Translations of this text are mine.

22. 南連百越，北盡三河。鐵騎成群，玉軸相接。海陵紅粟，倉儲之積靡窮。江浦黃旗，匡復之功何遠！班聲動而北風起，劍氣沖而南斗平。喑鳴則山岳崩頽，叱吒則風雲變色。

force connects naturally both to the land and to elements of nature. While Wu's monstrous body introduces bestial instincts into the court, the rebels' collective body connects with the earth and heaven and manifests the supernatural power to shake the court from afar. In the absence of the deposed prince, Luo constructs a surrogate rhetorical sovereign body: the rebel army's collective body. Luo's manifesto became the basis for all later anti-Wu propagandas.

Against this backdrop of recent insurrections and lingering misogynist propaganda, the *Great Cloud Sutra* affords an opportunity to read Empress Wu as an avatar of the Goddess of Pure Radiance, who was predicted to rule the world with a female body and military prowess. Reusing the *Sutra* to legitimize Wu not only identified the present empress with the goddess of the prophecy, but also removed the social stigma of her female body. The *Sutra* says:

All the countries of the Jambudvīpa (the realm of all human beings) will be obedient to her and there will be no one who will oppose or resist her. You shall obtain great sovereignty. You will teach and convert the cities and the villages which belong to you. You will destroy and subdue the non-Buddhists and rectify their erroneous views. Then you will in reality be a Bodhisattva constantly for incalculable Asamkhyeya kalpas (an infinitely long period of time), but you will receive and show a female body (in the human realm) in order to convert beings; you must know that it is an instrumental body, not a real female body.<sup>23</sup>

This episode justifies a female ruler by arguing that nothing about her is essentially feminine: the female body is no more than a manifestation, which the goddess should skillfully instrumentalize as an entry point to breaking down all forms of dualism (including gender, among many others).

The instrumental manifestation of a female body echoes another episode in *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經), allusions to which entered a panegyric poem for Empress Wu.<sup>24</sup> Śāriputra (*shelifu* 舍利弗), one of the chief male disciples of the Buddha, asks a goddess why she has not sloughed off her inferior female body, and the

23. 閻浮提中所有國土，悉來承伏，無違拒者，得大自在，教化所屬城邑聚落，摧伏外道諸邪異見。汝于爾時實是菩薩，常于無量阿僧祇劫，為化眾生故，現受女身，當知乃是方便之身，非實女身。The *Commentary* quotes the *Sutra* by fragments and rearranges them into a more coherent narrative. The Chinese texts are transcribed from the facsimile of Dunhuang Manuscript S. 6502 in *Dunhuang baozang* 敦煌寶藏, ed. Huang Yongwu 黃永武, vol. 47 (Taipei: Xin wen feng chu ban gong si, 1981–), 498–506. Translations of this text are my own. For a full transcription of the *Commentary*, see Lin Shitian 林世田, “A Structural Analysis of the *Commentary on the Great Cloud Sutra*” 《大雲經疏》結構分析, in *Treatise on Dunhuang Manuscripts Studies* 敦煌遺書研究論集, Series on Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism 6 漢藏佛學研究系列 6 (Beijing: zhongguo zang xue chu ban she, 2010), 39–54. For a full English translation of the *Commentary*, see Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology*, 183–238. This section is transcribed from *Dunhuang baozang*, vol. 47, 499.

24. Zhang Yizhi (張易之), an official and lover of Empress Wu, alluded to the interaction between a goddess and Śāriputra in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* in the verses: “As the evening sun settles in a secret crevasse deep in the mountains, with airy nonchalance a zephyr blows falling flowers earthward” (山中日暮幽岩下，冷然香吹落花深). In Juan 7 of the the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, when a goddess sprinkles down flowers, the Bodhisattvas' bodies do not retain the flowers, but Śāriputra, the spiritually unrealized disciple, cannot shake the flowers off because he still differentiates between the object and the self. Śāriputra then challenges the goddess regarding her female body. See Doran, *Transgressive Typologies*, 106–07 and Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon*, 221.



goddess turns this challenge into a teaching moment. Her pedagogy is mischievous: she turns Śāriputra into a woman like herself and herself into Śāriputra; then she turns him back and preaches on the need to overcome gender binaries and all differentiation:

Śāriputra asked: “Why do not you change your female bodily form?” The goddess replied: “For the last twelve years I have been looking in vain for a female bodily form; so what do you want me to change? This is like an illusionist who creates an illusory woman; is it correct to ask him to change this unreal woman?” Śāriputra said: “No, because it is not a real body; into what then can it be changed?” The goddess said: “All phenomena (including forms) are also unreal. So why have you asked me to change my unreal female body?”

Thereat, she used her supernatural powers to change Śāriputra into a heavenly goddess and herself into a man similar to Śāriputra, and asked him: “Why do not you change your female form?” Śāriputra replied: “I do not know why I have turned into a goddess.” The goddess said: “Śāriputra, if you can change your female body, all women should also be able to turn into men. Like Śāriputra who is not a woman but appears in female bodily form, all women are the same and though they appear in female form, they are fundamentally not women. Hence the Buddha said: ‘All things are neither male nor female.’” Thereat, the goddess again used her supernatural powers to change Śāriputra back to his (original) male body, and asked: “Where is your female body now?” Śāriputra replied: “The form of a woman neither exists nor is non-existent.” The goddess then declared: “Likewise, all things are fundamentally neither existing nor non-existent, and that which neither exists nor is non-existent is proclaimed by the Buddha.”<sup>25</sup>

The exchange of physical bodies between the goddess and Śāriputra is consistent with the unreality of all forms. Because bodies have forms but no substance, a female body cannot be the basis for social or ideological stigma. The convenience of turning female into male bodies and vice versa opens up enough space to reclaim both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits and to rearrange them to construct a fantastic body for the queen. In the same vein, the instrumental female body in the *Great Cloud Sutra* empties out stereotypical female bodies and detaches prejudices and biases from a woman ruler. The *Commentary*, in response to Wu’s political violence and the contemporary rumors, furthers the sutra’s justification of coercive power, which is traditionally masculine.

In the *Great Cloud Sutra*, the Goddess of Pure Radiance is described as “obtaining one quarter of the land governed by a Cakravartin king” (得轉輪王所統領處四分之一).<sup>26</sup>

25. 舍利弗言：“汝何以不轉女身？”天曰：“我從十二年來，求女人相了不可得。當何所轉？譬如幻師化作幻女，若有人問：‘何以不轉女身？’是人為正問不？”舍利弗言：“不也！幻無定相，當何所轉？”天曰：“一切諸法亦復如是，無有定相，云何乃問不轉女身？”即時天女以神通力，變舍利弗令如天女，天自化身如舍利弗，而問言：“何以不轉女身？”舍利弗以天女像而答言：“我今不知何轉而變為女身？”天曰：“舍利弗！若能轉此女身，則一切女人亦當能轉。如舍利弗非女而現女身，一切女人亦復如是，雖現女身，而非女也。是故佛說一切諸法非男、非女。”即時天女還攝神力，舍利弗身還復如故。天問舍利弗：“女身色相，今何所在？”舍利弗言：“女身色相，無在無不在。”天曰：“一切諸法，亦復如是，無在無不在。夫無在無不在者，佛所說也。”The Chinese texts are from Juan 7 of *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, (T. 0474) 14.0529a14–28, 0548b22–c08. Translations are from Lu, K’uan Yü, *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra (Wei mo chieh so shuo ching)*, Clear Light Series (Berkeley: Shambala, 1972), 78.

26. Transcribed from Manuscript S.6502, in *Dunhuang baozang*, Vol. 47, 499.

Wu's Buddhist propagandists expanded this single sentence into a story in which the empress subdues the rebels. The *Commentary* politicizes the destruction of dissidents: "the Great Saint's extraordinary virtues will cultivate places in all directions and all four [types] of barbarians will come to pledge allegiance. Those who pledge enduring loyalty will obtain the previously announced fortune; but if traitors and rebels emerge, even if the state spares them, heaven will penalize them and they will destroy themselves" (伏以大聖威德，化及萬方，四夷之人，咸來歸附。然其永效赤心者，即同獲前福，如有背叛作逆者，縱使國家不誅，上天降罰，並自磨滅。)<sup>27</sup> These terms are more Confucian than Buddhist, more masculine than feminine, and, most importantly, more aggressive than pacifist.

The vocabulary draws on a well-received Confucian discourse to legitimize a male ruler as the sage king who offers moral guidance that cultivates the world: "the Great Saint's extraordinary virtues will cultivate places in all directions" (伏以大聖威德，化及萬方). The *Commentary* also turns the heretics, who in the *Sutra* are to be converted by the Goddess through Buddhist preaching, into "rebels" (背叛作逆者) and "barbarians" (四夷), terms that may refer to harassers at the border, including the Turks and Tibetans in the 680s. However, internal strife rings as loudly as territorial disputes with neighboring states. The *Commentary* invokes heaven to execute the rebels, "even if the state leaves them unattended" (如有背叛作逆者，縱使國家不誅，上天降罰，並自磨滅。). The princes' failed insurrections against Empress Wu and her purge of the court offered real-life illustrations of this curse.

However, immediate gratification in this reward-and-punishment system would have violated the Buddhist principle of karma. The impersonal Buddhist karmic force is different from the Confucian heaven (上天), which rains punishment down on the rebels to improve the state's governance. Buddhist teachings refuse to translate the spiritual principle of cause and effect in past and future lives into secular reward and punishment. However, the *Commentary* consigns state violence to heaven and reads the ill fate of all rebels as ordained by a supernatural executor of justice. The Buddhism-based propaganda for the empress is nested within a Confucian, and exclusively masculine, discourse of the transcendental kingly body as the agent of heaven, at the cost of bending Buddhist doctrines.

In sum, the legitimization and militarization of Empress Wu's fantastic body occur in three steps. First, the Buddhist propagandists draw on the *Great Cloud Sutra* to identify the Goddess of Pure Radiance as Wu's political predecessor. Buddhist doctrine is then used to teach that the female body is a manifestation instead of a real body, thereby removing social stigma from the empress. Lastly, the *Commentary* embellishes the Buddhist sutra with the Confucian cosmology in which rebellions and insurrections are subdued through the force of heaven. The last step of reclaiming Confucian, masculine, kingly discourse is crucial: the manifestation of the female body is an instrumental body, but the construction of a military body does not rely on female traits. The sutra does not clarify how to instrumentalize a female body that has been "manifested" to subdue the

27. Transcribed from Manuscript S.6502, in *Dunhuang baozang*, Vol. 47, 500.

rebels, which leaves room for the *Commentary* to reintroduce the idea of heaven and to tuck in the traditional portrayal of the male sovereign as the agent of the heaven. It wavers between the Buddhist karmic theory of receiving punishment for the disobedience of a preordained king and the Confucian self-rectifying cosmic order that causes disaster to descend on the rebels.

In Wu's case, this impatient reclamation of Confucian discourse in the *Commentary* of a Buddhist sutra shows that the efficacy of a secondary symbolic order in justifying militarized female rule still depends on the primary worldview. The Buddhist teaching turns the physical body into an instrumentalized manifestation in order to detach female bodies from misogynist associations. It thus generates a fantastic body that is no less than a fantasy of the human mind. In this way, it removes the barriers to a full reconstruction of the sovereign body. The physical body of the female ruler is no longer feminine in essence. The fantastic body of the queen is hollowed out, so that the Confucian ideas of heaven and sovereign correspondence can fill and strengthen the hollow body. The Buddhist propaganda reclaims the primary Confucian worldview that privileges male rule and reworks it as a secondary order.

In a different historical setting, the coercive power of the queen manifested itself differently. In the 1190s, during Richard I's imprisonment in Germany, Eleanor of Aquitaine brokered a peace between William Longchamp, Prince John, and Walter of Coutances.<sup>28</sup> To balance the state-church power in Richard's absence, Richard assigned Longchamp to serve as the justiciar with Bishop Hugh, together with two secular counterweights, Hugh Bardulf and William Brewer. However, Eleanor had sown the seeds of discord by bringing John back: "Longchamp, as chancellor and papal legate in addition, was well on the way to upsetting the balance of power. Moreover, the queen-mother, Eleanor, pleaded with Richard to release John from his oath to stay out of England, and he imprudently did so."<sup>29</sup> John leveraged the barons' antagonism towards Longchamp to put himself forward as the champion of baronial interests against the chancellor's interference. From captivity, Richard sent Walter of Coutances, the archbishop of Rouen, to restore peace between John and Longchamp. As Longchamp's papal legateship lapsed with the death of the pope, Walter proposed in a council at London in October that Longchamp be deposed from the office of justiciar and later sent into exile.

Here came Eleanor's first major intervention. Longchamp in exile excommunicated with his former English government colleagues and imposed an interdict upon his diocese of Ely; in revenge, Walter of Coutances excommunicated him and seized his episcopal estates. In Cambridgeshire in 1192, Eleanor "was a prime factor in forcing Coutances and Longchamp to patch up a quarrel that was causing such woe to innocent people, persuading them to withdraw their excommunications and Walter to restore the Ely

28. For the political strife between John and Longchamp and Eleanor's role in it, see Roger of Howden, *Chronica magistri Rogeri de Houeden*, ed. William Stubbs, 4 vols., *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* 51 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1868–71), Vol. 3, lxxxiv–xci.

29. W. L. Warren, *King John, 1167–1216* (originally published 1981, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996 reprinted), 40.

estates.”<sup>30</sup> Richard of Devizes, in his *Chronicon*, commented of Eleanor: “who could be so savage or cruel that this woman could not bend him to her wishes?”<sup>31</sup> Eleanor’s strong will did not win her praise, but the efficacy of her intervention was duly acknowledged.

As the anger of the two prelates died down, Eleanor had to deal with her son John’s wild scheming. John’s resentment started to build when Walter of Coutances gained popularity and his own prospects of succeeding to the throne in Richard’s absence appeared to be waning fast. Upon hearing of Richard’s return from captivity in January 1193, John resorted to King Philip II of France, who was eager to tear the Angevin dominions apart.<sup>32</sup> Phillip seconded John’s rebellion while pushing up Richard’s ransom, but Eleanor stood for no such plan: “The government, stiffened by the queen-mother who knew how to cope with her sons, fortified the royal castles, laid prompt siege to John’s, and mustered a home-guard against the threatened invasion.”<sup>33</sup> Eleanor maintained the defense until John agreed to a truce and paid part of Richard’s ransom out of his own lands.

Eleanor’s administrative persona reached beyond the romance heroines of the *fin’amor* literature that she patronized.<sup>34</sup> It is illustrative to think of the construction of her royal fantastic body as a rhetorical doubling of her sovereign body in Marie de France’s *Lanval*. Pappano reads Guinevere and the fairy lady as two sides of Eleanor: the former with scandalous desire as the source of disharmony, the latter with otherworldly power to restore courtly order. Pappano’s point is well taken, as Eleanor’s divorce and remarriage and the accompanying rumors could have easily reduced her to an evil queen with uncontrollable desires like Guinevere. However, if the reader brackets gender (as Empress Wu’s Buddhist teaching urges), Prince John is a better historical counterpart for Guinevere, who entices and entraps the unpopular foreigner. John’s role in the court was less gendered than Guinevere’s, but he adopted her ploys to slander and sow discord. Longchamp’s situation in the court was parallel to that of Lanval: the barons despised Longchamp as a foreigner who had risen out of obscurity, and the bishops resented him for his papal legateship over them.<sup>35</sup> If Guinevere’s ploys are read in light of John’s manipulations, the *lai*’s focus is no longer Eleanor’s desires but John’s ambition. Guinevere pleads with Arthur after Lanval rejects her advances. The goal is to alienate the foreign vassal from the king and his court by presenting him as a transgressor and a potential threat:

She falls at his feet and implores his mercy  
And says that Lanval has shamed her.  
He solicits her to be his lover

30. Ralph V. Turner, “Eleanor of Aquitaine in the Governments of Her Sons Richard and John,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 77–96, at 84.

31. Quoted from Turner, “Eleanor of Aquitaine in the Governments,” 84.

32. Warren, *King John*, 44.

33. Warren, *King John*, 45.

34. On love poetry as a form of literary revenge for marriage arranged for political convenience in Eleanor’s time, see Moshé Lazar, “Cupid, the Lady, and the Poet: Modes of Love at Eleanor of Aquitaine’s Court,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Patron and Politician*, ed. William W. Kibler, *Symposia in the Arts and the Humanities* 3 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 27–52, at 37.

35. Warren, *King John*, 41.

Because she refused him  
 He insulted and humiliated her,  
 He boasted that he had such a lover,  
 One so elegant, noble, and proud,  
 That her chambermaid, the poorest girl who served her,  
 Was better than the queen.<sup>36</sup>

With the removal of affection and eroticism, the essence of Guinevere's persuasive strategies surfaces: she entraps the king into a rivalry with Lanval. Her first step is to blame Lanval for claiming a king's woman; she then objectifies herself and Lanval's woman in a competition of value in order to diminish the king's masculinity. Arthur immediately puts Lanval on trial against the judges and knights. This is similar to John's machinations against Longchamp and his later rebellion: to curry favor with the barons, John dismissed Longchamp the foreigner for claiming undeserving courtly status and papal legateship; to avenge Walter of Coutances for the loss of his chance to succeed to the throne in Richard's absence, John pleaded with Philip to support his war with England. Seen in this light, although Eleanor's female body easily aligns her with Guinevere, her son's scheming is a "feminine" approach. Instead of using traditional "masculine" aggression, John, like Guinevere, preys on the competitive impulses of powerful prelates and the king to stir up infighting and civil wars. The shifting of the received gender roles adds nuance to Marie de France's text. Rather than shoehorning Eleanor into Guinevere's role, Marie offers an opportunity to associate John with Guinevere: what if a prince conspires in a stereotypically "feminine" way, while a queen-mother deals with his madness in a "manly" manner?

Unlike Wu's hollowed-out instrumental body, the Eleanor-Fairy Lady's body is sexualized and feminized in a conventional way, but the eagle on top of the tent of the Fairy Lady stands out. Pappano associates Eleanor with the eagle in Geoffrey of Monmouth's prophecy: "the eagle of the broken treaty shall rejoice in her third nesting" (*Aquila rupti foederis tertia nidificatione gaudebit*). Ralph of Diceto explains, "The queen is meant by the eagle, because she stretches out her wings over two kingdoms, France and England. She was separated from the king of the French on account of consanguinity, and from the king of the English by suspicion and imprisonment; . . . and so she was on both sides the eagle of a broken treaty."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, although the Fairy Lady instrumentalizes her physical body to offer infinite sex to Lanval, her body, like Empress Wu's fantastic body, is a "manifested" body. The hunting eagle atop the tent is an extension of her body and part of her core identity. The description of the Fairy Lady follows the eagle and tent:

On top was a golden eagle;  
 I can't tell its value,

36. As piez li chiet, merci crie,/ E dit que lanval l'a hunie./ De druerie la requist;/ Pur ceo qu'ele l'en escundist,/ Mult la laidí e avilla./ De tel amie se vanta./ ki tant ert cuinte e noble e fiere/ Que mielz valeit sa chamberiere,/ La plus povre ki la serveit./ Que la reine ne faiseit. (ll. 317–26). The Anglo-Norman texts are from Marie de France, *Lais De Marie De France*, ed. Karl Warnke, trans. Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Lettres Gothiques* (Paris: Libr. Générale Française, 1990), quoted by line numbers. Translations of this text are my own.

37. Pappano, "the Alien Queen," 354. See also Chance, *Literary Subversions*, 52 on the Sparrow Hawk.

Nor of the cords or the pegs  
 That held the parts of the tent;  
 No king under heaven could buy them  
 For any price he might offer.  
 Inside the tent was the maiden.<sup>38</sup>

The description proceeds from the top downward, including not only the eagle, but also the cords and stakes of the tent, which leaves the impression that the queen's body *includes* the eagle and tent. However, an allusion to the wealth of the king under heaven (*rei suz ciel*) is inserted between the tent and the maiden. This allusion disrupts the spatial continuity, suddenly moving away from the tent to a wider span of lands "under heaven" (*suz ciel*). The otherworldly space never enters this world without overwhelming it. The eagle militarizes the fantastic body, which connects the exposed body of the Lady with Eleanor's exposed breast in the battle of a crusade.

Another moment with a highlighted eagle image is when the Fairy Lady appears at Lanval's trial in Arthur's court: she arrives with a falcon, but the courtly spectators see her body before they see the bird. Just as Eleanor had to intervene when the powerful prelates and her son disrupted the power balance, the Fairy Lady reappears only when the hostility towards Lanval threatens to collapse Arthur's legal system. However, the reader should remember that the Fairy Lady has been the source of discord. It is highly likely that she knows from the beginning that Lanval's promise of secrecy will be broken and she will need to disappear and reappear. Here is how she directs the sight of the courtly audience:

She was dressed in this way:  
 In a shirt of white linen,  
 Which left both her sides exposed,  
 As it was laced on both sides.  
 She had an elegant body, a long waist,  
 A neck whiter than snow on a branch,  
 Grey-green eyes and white skin,  
 A beautiful mouth, a well-formed nose,  
 Dark eyebrows and a bright forehead  
 And hair curling and blonde;  
 No golden thread casts such a gleam  
 As did her hair in the sun.  
 Her mantle was dark purple;  
 She had wrapped its end around her.  
 She held a sparrow hawk in her hand,  
 And a greyhound followed her.<sup>39</sup>

38. Un aigle d'or ot desus mis;/ De cel ne sai dire le pris;/ Ne des cordes ne des pessuns/ ki del tref tienent les giruns;/ Suz ciel n'a rei kis eslijast/ Pur nul avoir qu'il i donast./ Dedenz cel tref fu la pucele (ll. 87–93).

39. Ele iert vestue en itel guise/ De chaine blanc e de chemise,/ Que tuit les coste li pareient,/ Ki de dous parz lacie esteient./ Le cors ot gent, basse la hanche,/ Le col plus blanc que neif sur branche,/ Les uiz ot vairs e blanc le vis,/ Bele buche, nes bien asis,/ Les surcilz bruns e bel le frunt/ E le chief cresp e alkes blunt;/ Fils d'or ne gete tel luur/ Cum sun chevel cuntere le jur./ Sis mantels fu de purpre bis;/ Les pans en ot entour li mis./ Un espervier sur sun poin tint,/ E uns levrier apres lui vint (ll. 565–80).

The Queen still holds the falcon, the symbol of her territorial possession and military prowess. When Lanval meets her for the first time, the eagle comes into his sight before the Queen, but now the court sees her body first and her hunting animals next. The order of the description has been inverted, though the fantastic body is the same. In the courtly presence, the gaze is inverted: her militarized alter-bodies, or the aggressive parts of her identity, have to follow her beauty.

The presentation of the Queen's fantastic body allows the gaze of the courtly audience first to focus on her exposed waist and then her neck, and then to move upward to her mouth, nose, and forehead until it reaches her hair. This presentation analogizes her body parts to nature: her flesh on her bones is like snow on a branch, and her hair is like the golden thread that attracts a sunbeam. This fantastic body is loaded with the weight of the natural world. When the gaze moves from her waist to her neck, the two elongated parts of the body lengthen the procedure of moving upwards. Of her hair, the author says: "no golden thread casts such a gleam/ as did her hair in the sun" (*fil d'or ne gette tel luur/ cum sun chevel cuntre le jur*). The verb *gette* directs the two lines: the glittering hair commands the action of shining. The Fairy Lady's mythological body is part of nature and redirects nature. The delicacy of the body stands in contrast to the fierceness of the two hunting animals that follow; however, the fantastic body of the Lady is not complete without these animals. "She holds a falcon on her fist,/ And a greyhound runs behind her" (*Un espervier sur sun poin tient,/ E un leverer apres lui vient*). Unlike Empress Wu's emptied "instrumental female body," this body is loaded, both naturally and supernaturally.

The narrator dedicates a few lines to the courtly audience's responses. Her fantastic body is well received in the court: "The judges who saw her,/ Considered it a great marvel;/ There was not one who looked at her/ did not warm up with sheer joy" (*Li jugeur, ki la veient,/ A grant merveille le teneient;/ n'i ot un sul ki l'esguardast/ De dreite joie n'eschalfast*, ll. 593–96). The marvel generates intense physical reactions on the part of the judges: the two verbs *esgardast* (look) and *eschalfast* (glow) move from visuality to physicality. The warmth is physical warmth, and the joy is *dreite* (direct, sheer). The Celticized fantasy does not exclude Christian allusions to the descending of the Holy Spirit. The loaded body does not contain its energy, but emanates its power to the spectators. Cassidy Leventhal, for instance, reads the Fairy Lady's entrance into the court as a moment of transcendence. She argues that the appearance of the Fairy Lady is Platonic: one maiden after another comes as a herald, but all of them are poor representations. The Fairy Lady is the ideal of ideals, though she can manifest herself in infinite variations. Ultimately, this relationship with "Her" and the Otherworld provides meaning and psychological purpose to reality.<sup>40</sup> However, the Celtic elements that do not get subsumed in the Christian worldview pull the ideal back to the corporeal. The realization of Christian transcendence depends on a Celticized body.

40. Cassidy Leventhal, "Finding Avalon: The Place and Meaning of the Otherworld in Marie De France's *Lanval*," *Neophilologus* 98 (2014): 193–204, at 199.

Along these lines, when considering the Fairy Lady's intervention in the legal disputes involved in Lanval's trial, an obvious reading is to see a correspondence between Eleanor and the Fairy Lady, who reconciles the two parties when the worst excesses of her love affair with Lanval get out of control; a deeper reading would see the fairy lady's initial contact with Lanval as her first step in sowing temporary discord for the sake of future harmony, just as Eleanor asked Richard to release John from his oath to stay out of England. The Eleanor-Fairy Lady figure has planned to interfere in courtly politics from the very beginning. Arthur's court, instead of love with Lanval, is her target.

Marie's text offers a more imaginative interpretation of Eleanor's political maneuverings: upon Richard's departure, she decided to call John back not out of maternal affection, but rather because she wanted John and the foreigner Longchamp to check each other. She would never have stood for John's usurpation, but she knew Richard's appointment of officials was imbalanced. Richard's dispatch of Walter of Coutances to reconcile John and Longchamp again disrupted the "balance of terror," so she had to "disappear" as the Fairy Lady. The unexpected mutual excommunication between Walter and Longchamp and John's rebellions, however, demanded that she "reappear" to remedy the ensuing evils, just as the Fairy Lady enters the legal disputes in Arthur's court. This more nuanced Eleanor-Fairy Lady correspondence can now lead into a comparison of the mythologization of the queen's body.

Eleanor-Fairy Lady's sexualized and militarized body is different from Empress Wu-Goddess's "manifested, instrumental female body." If the two fantastic bodies are read separately, the power of each invokes the secondary symbolic power in its cultural system to construct a "fantastic" body of the queen. If they are read together, differences in the use of secondary symbolic systems emerge. In Empress Wu's case, the legitimization reclaims the Confucian model only after the Buddhist myth removes the negative associations attached to a female body; in Eleanor's case, the Celticized representation neither desexualizes the body nor removes feminine traits and sexual connotations. Insistent love seems to be the fundamental nature of the fairies in Celtic myths, but *fn'amor* becomes political convenience in *Lanval*. Unlike Empress Wu's hollowed-out body, which has to be cleansed of public prejudices, the Fairy Lady's body is a pileup of unfulfilled desires—not, however, the desires of the fairy, but of Lanval, the neglected courtier. When the fantastic bodies come into contact with reality, the military body of Wu changes from a defender of the Buddhist doctrine to an administrative guardian of the territory and governance. Eleanor's coercive power lies in her ability to maintain a balanced power structure and forestall potential rebellions. The hollowed-out and piled-up bodies take different routes, but they both work in an integral system of symbolism. Nothing overflows.

#### FANTASTIC BODIES, FANTASTIC LANDS: AVALON AND THE LAND OF NON-THOUGHT

The king's dynastic body must connect with the land to justify landowning and taxation; likewise, the *Commentary* and *Lanval* associate both queens' rhetorical doublings, their



imagined immortal bodies, with lands, but only lands of fantasy. Though Empress Wu ruled mainland China, the sutra *Commentary* associates her with the imagined Land of Non-Thought (*wuxiangguo* 無想國) in the *Great Cloud Sutra*. Eleanor of Aquitaine was Duchess of Aquitaine, but Marie de France imagined Avalon, traditionally associated with the Celtic supernatural world: “Although the reader never actually sees it in the *lai*, the fairy queen’s realm is traditionally associated with Morgain, matriarchal Celtic supernature, and the Other World to which Arthur is in some (mainly Welsh) texts ferried after the battle of Camlann.”<sup>41</sup> This section compares the symbolic reimagination of the two queens’ landowning. If the Buddhist discourse hollows out the body in order to reclaim Confucianism and the Celticized body depends on surplus and excess to create meaning, this section discusses whether the imagined lands correspond to these fantastic bodies and considers how the reconstructed territories justify the queen’s rules.

The *Great Cloud Sutra* foretells that the Goddess of Radiance will rule a state called the Land of Non-Thought (*wuxiang* 無想), and commentators in the service of Empress Wu focus on the name of this land:

The Sutra says: “[the land is] called Non-Thought (Wu Xiang) because previously the sutra said that the Goddess of Pure Radiance practiced the *samadhi* (meditation) of non-thought (*wuxiang sanmei* 無想三昧); therefore, the name of the country is Non-Thought (*wuxiang* 無想). Now, the Goddess-Empress (Empress Wu) practiced extraordinary acts [inspired by the] thought of the non-existence of the self, of men, and of all beings, etc., so the name of the country is Non-Thought (*wuxiang* 無想).<sup>42</sup>

The Land of Non-Thought is a land of the Buddhist ideal of non-dualism based on the non-differentiation between the self and others. The *Commentary* portrays Empress Wu as a practitioner of Buddhist *samadhi*, a purification of mind through meditation. However, the word *samadhi* implies collecting, meditative “absorbing” and the concentration of power, all of which politically allude to the centrifugal force of the sovereign.

In addition, the *Commentary* sketches the geography of the imagined land, in which the name of a river provides a basis for reclaiming Confucianism and invoking Confucius himself:

The sutra says: “In that country there will be a river called Black River (*heihe* 黑河).” The cycle of birth and death is likened to (crossing) a “river” and the afflictions (in it) are “black.” Therefore, the Goddess-Empress (Empress Wu) embodies the benevolence and compassion of a Bodhisattva and eradicates afflictions from the great river (of life and death). Moreover, the Wu clan bears the surname Yu (羽), which denotes the north; the color of the north is black and Yu refers to water (*shui* 水), so the river is called Black River (*heihe* 黑河). Moreover, the surname formed from black (*hei* 黑) and water (*shui* 水) indicates a black dress (*heiyi* 黑衣), which corresponds to the *Prophecy*

41. Chance, *Literary Subversions*, 53.

42. 言“名曰無想”者，即前經云淨光天女修無想三昧，故國名無想也。今神皇所修勝業，皆無我人眾生等想，故國名無想也。 Transcribed from Manuscript S.6502, in *Dunhuang baozang*, Vol. 47, 502.

of *Confucius*. Humbly we know that the Goddess-Empress in her adolescence had already worn a dark robe, which can only mean “black dress” (*heiyi* 黑衣).<sup>43</sup>

To reclaim Confucianism, the commentary builds a connection between Empress Wu’s clothes (a black dress) and the Black River in the Land of Non-Thought, but the exegetical deduction digresses to other schools of thought before it winds back to Confucianism. For instance, in its switch from the visual (black) to the aural (the musical note Yu, which is also the surname of the Wu clan), it invokes the theory of music and Yin-yang (陰陽): “Yu is also the name of a note in music, thus the authors take advantage of using the term yu in connection with the north, water and darkness according to the typical scheme of the Yin-yang school.”<sup>44</sup> The exegetical imagination roams from a Buddhist explanation of Wu’s redemptive power against the afflictions in the Black River of life and death to Wu’s family name’s connection with a musical note associated with the north (black), then to the five colors of the Five Elements (*wuxing* 五行, in which water corresponds to black), and finally to her black dress. These associations, inspired by either Confucianism or the Yin-yang School, violate the principle of non-differentiation in the Land of Non-Thought. However, like Empress Wu’s body, the land is “emptied out” of cognition in order to accommodate all schools of thought. In this manner, the *Commentary* reconstructs the Land of Non-Thought as the mainland under Wu’s reign: the Land of Non-Thought enters reality and becomes the Land of Many Thoughts.

In contrast, in *Lanval*, the Fairy Queen spirits the knight away to the fairy land Avalon, and the Otherworld never comes into contact with the real world: “With her he went to Avalon,/ so the Bretons say,/ to a very beautiful island;/ the young man was carried off there./ No one ever heard another word of him,/ and I can tell no more” (*Od li s’en vait en Avalun, / Ceo nus recuntent li Bretun, / En un isle que mult est beals; / La fu raviz li dameiseals. / Nuls n’en oi puis plus parler, / Ne jeo n’en sai avant cunter*, ll. 659–64). Lanval has to jump on the Fairy Lady’s horse because he has already abandoned his own horse, which, like the eagle of the Fairy Lady, is the character’s alter ego. In Lanval’s first encounter with the Fairy Lady, the text reads: “But his horse trembles violently:/ He frees its reins and it goes off;/ He lets it roll around in the middle of the meadow” (*Mes sis chevaux tremble forment:/ Il le descengle, si s’en vait, / Enmi le pre vultrer le fait*, ll. 46–48). Upon his entry into the magic world, Lanval loses connection with his horse: “He does not worry about his horse,/ Who is grazing in the meadow” (*De sun cheval ne tient nul plait, / Ki devant lui pesseit al pre*, ll. 78–79). Lanval becomes horseless; according to Jane Chance, “his abandonment of his horse symboli[zes] his departure from social rank. Shedding this signal attribute of chivalry allows Lanval to open the door to a fantasy world ruled by a fairy queen.”<sup>45</sup> Lanval does not carry the

43. 經言“彼國有河，名曰黑河”者，但生死名河，煩惱稱黑，即顯神皇菩薩慈悲化生，於大河中除煩惱故。又竊惟武氏羽姓，在於北方，北方色黑，羽又為水，故曰黑河。又黑水成姓，即表黑衣，與孔子讖相符，名黑河也。伏承神皇幼小時已披緇服，固惟黑衣之義也。 Transcribed from Manuscript S.6502, in *Dunhuang baozang*, Vol. 47, 502–03.

44. Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology*, 215–16, note 178.

45. Chance, *Literary Subversions*, 45.

social marks of the real world to meet his Fairy Queen; the fantastic body of the queen is connected only to the fantasy world.

Avalon remains an Other, and the Fairy Queen cannot rule the mainland. In Pappano's words, "In an ironic reversal of the ubiquitous folktale motif, the *lai* ends with Lanval's leaping on the fairy lady's horse behind her, to be carried off to Avalon, a place like Aquitaine, where the queen is not foreign but her king is."<sup>46</sup> Leventhal argues that this is a transcendence, which "demands a responsiveness to—an *obligation* to—something greater than ourselves, and indeed it is with Lanval's transcendence that he not only conquers reality but impacts the whole of reality."<sup>47</sup> Entering Avalon is Lanval's ultimate success, as he is socially successful in the end as well. Everyone in Arthur's court is happy to learn that the knight has been saved and acknowledges the primacy of this transcendence.

A comparison between the two fantastic lands reveals that the Land of Non-Thought actually holds all thoughts, while Avalon is forever out of reach but is psychologized as the ultimate goal, an integral part of transcendence and a channel for surplus energy. The fantasy worlds are likened to the queens' bodies: Wu empties out her body in order to absorb more, but Eleanor builds up energy and emanates a surplus until it reaches a peak. The directions of the energies are different: if Buddhism vacates, Celtic mythology builds up to an excess. In Wu-Goddess's case, the secondary Buddhist transcendence aims to descend back to the Confucian order; for Eleanor-Fairy Queen, the Celtic myths descend to animal instincts and desires in order to transcend them to achieve a new balance of power.

## CONCLUSION

To take the readings above a step further, the two texts, by mythologizing the queens' immortal bodies and lands, offer political metaphors for Empress Wu's and Eleanor of Aquitaine's strategies and machinations. Taking the "emptying-out in order to reclaim" route, Wu purged the court and eradicated all her rivals in order to reconstruct a new administrative order that constrained the imperial prerogative; adopting the "introducing excess in order to transcend" approach, Eleanor brought back John, "the excessive evil," to strike a new power balance in the court in Richard's absence.

Reading *Lanval* and the Commentary on *the Great Cloud Sutra* together also allows us to address Chen Yinqu'e's question of whether and why Buddhism justifies all of the tyrants dismissed by Confucianism. It would be a gross misrepresentation to essentialize Buddhism or Celtic culture as "justifying female rule" or any kind of transgressive ruler. It is only when Buddhism or Celtic culture stands in relation to a primary worldview—Confucianism or Christianity—that it can provide an outlet for the historically necessary but ideologically unacceptable interference of an unconventional power. Buddhism hollows out and the Celtic myths prioritize surplus, but the goal in both cases is to qualify the primary worldview to strike a new balance in moments of crisis. ■

46. Pappano, "the Alien Queen," 357.

47. Leventhal, "Finding Avalon," 203.