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Women on Top: Power and Transgression in the *Libro del Conde Partinuplés*

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The Spanish *Libro del Conde Partinuplés* is a prose version of a popular French romance written in the late 12th century. Perhaps not as well known today as other tales of chivalric knights, the Partinuplés tale was translated and re-told throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and well into the 19th century. The story appears in Spain at the end of the 15th century in both Castilian and Catalan. The French version, coming in at a staggering 10,600 verses, dwarfs the Spanish *Libro* by approximately two thirds. The differences in length are attributed to shortened descriptions, reduced direct addresses and the absence altogether of a narrator (Taylor Smith, xliii).

Both the tale of Cupid and Psyche as well as Celtic fairy lore have been identified as possible source material for the basic story line. Richard Taylor Smith and Helaine Newstead argue for the latter rather than the former, given the widespread popularity of the Celtic lore. The story of the *Libro del Conde Partinuplés* begins with Melior, the empress of Constantinople, who is given the task of finding a mate within a two-year period. She quickly chooses Partinuplés, a young Count from France, for his tremendous beauty. Magically transported to her castle in an unmanned ship, Partinuplés discovers a castle and kingdom shrouded in mystery. He finally meets Melior in her bed and she reveals who she is and what she wishes. The Count agrees to stay with her and be her husband. However, Melior imposes a taboo – he must not try to see her for two years – if he breaks this taboo, he will be put to death. The Count ultimately breaks the taboo, at the urging of the Bishop of Paris, and then must escape the castle, with the help of Melior's half sister Urracla, and return to France. After going mad in the forest of the Ardennes, Urracla finds him again, cures him, and he is knighted. He then battles for Melior's hand in a tournament and the lovers are reunited.

The plot of the story follows the typical structure of the romance: entering into a love connection, losing said connection, and then winning the hand of the lover at the end. The narrative elements, too, follow many of the requisite characteristics of the romance: magic and illusion are involved, disguise of the lover, adversity, tamed and wild spaces, and the ultimate showdown of the tournament. Matilda Bruckner calls the final tournament a 'beauty contest', since the lady ultimately chooses her mate according to his looks (120). The plot of the 15th century *Libro* follows the plot of the 12th century French romance. However, the *Libro del Conde Partinuplés* reflects a social and cultural liminality that is not apparent in the other versions of the story. Indeed, the female-dominated spaces provide a liminal space within which accepted social norms and power structures are questioned and, as Ibtissam Bouachrine states, 'put into crisis' (43).

The Spanish romance is neither entirely Spanish nor French, neither Eastern nor Western, it neither espouses a 'pagan' nor a pure Christian ideology. The transgressive nature of the importance of women and the importance of the Christian Church furthers the liminal nature of the story.

Liminality is one of the three rites of passage that a hero must pass through to reach his final goal. According to Victor and Edith Turner, there are three rites of passage in any

pilgrimage: separation, limen, and aggregation (11). Our hero, as pilgrim, must pass through each of these rites in order to become the man he is meant to be.

Originally, the goals of the chivalric romance were associated with seeking the Holy Grail and participating in the Crusades. Both of these goals set the romance hero on a pilgrimage with the sole notion of serving God. Distractions, both magical and feminine (often one and the same) were to be avoided or overcome. Although later romances, like the *Partinuplés* tale, are more nostalgic than religious in nature, Christianity and magic play important roles in the story.

The Count begins his journey by being separated from his family and magically transported to a kingdom cloaked in mystery. When he arrives he is an uncertain child. The derived nature of the kingdom both frightens and intrigues him. Melior's enchanted kingdom, Cabeçadoire, demonstrates all the characteristics of the enchanted garden space. Bouachrine writes that the garden space in medieval romance maintains a plurality of functions: there is a possibility of multiple perspectives. Gardens may hold the secrets of kings or the secrets of lovers; they may be reflections of paradise on earth; and they may also be spaces in which multiple cultures may encounter one another on neutral ground (29). Although the garden is most often associated with women and feminine desire, Bouachrine insists that its ambiguity defies 'fixed and essentializing binary oppositions that have traditionally been used in the discussions of space and gender' (44).

Cabeçadoire's enchantments are distracting and the prohibitions placed on the Count within its confines lead the reader to believe that, like other gardens that chivalric knights face, this space is one of distraction, spectacle and falsehood. Indeed, Dayle Seidenspinner-Nuñez believes that the Count's 'fall' or betrayal is a blessing in disguise. She argues that the only way inner transformation can happen to both Melior and *Partinuplés* is to strip away illusion and magic (66). There is no doubt that both characters develop once the taboo has been broken. Yet it is within this space of Cabeçadoire that allows Melior to provide *Partinuplés* with the appropriate tools to face these challenges once he is banished from paradise.

Corinne Saunders calls Cabeçadoire an "ornate and rival city-court rather than an infernal world" (141). Yet Melior and her kingdom maintain all the hallmarks of the enchanted and slightly sinister fairy world. *Partinuplés* is abducted while on a hunt and is spirited off to the magic kingdom on a pilotless ship. Once he arrives, he is seduced by the spectacle of the kingdom:

Y quando lo desenfrenó, estando así cerca de su cavallo, miró a un cabo y a otro y no vido a nadie: ni hombre ni muger ninguna, ni cavallo, ni asnos, ni ganados, ni oyó cantar gallos ni tañer campanas. Y comenzó de santiguarse y estregar los ojos y faziéndose maravillado en ver aquella cibdad tan fermosa. Y dezía: "Santa María, valme si duermo o ensueño, porque veo así esta tierra sola sin ninguna cosa, porque quando el hombre duerme ensueña destas cosas tales. Mas yo creo ca no duermo que mi cavallo cabe mi lo tengo y miro de cara la cibdad. (14)

Spectacle in much of the romance tradition is associated with illusion, and therefore is seen as negative because it tends to distract the hero from his goal. But Cabeçadoire allows for what Saunders calls "wish-fulfilment" (146). The garden presents a safe space for the lovers to experiment, away from the prying eyes of the traditional court. Although the

garden space cannot be reduced to the idea of paradise on earth, its remoteness and inaccessibility to everyone except those who are invited to partake of its joys allow for those within to yield to its transformative powers.

Penny Simons writes that the rural space in the romance is associated with transgression, both of social and gender norms and of generic expectations (319). The space dominated by Melior is presented in direct opposition to the masculine dominated courtly space. According to Simons, conventions collide in these spaces, allowing for subversion of meaning. (23).

When Partinuplés first appears at the Empress's castle, he has yet to be armed as a knight, nor has he found a real purpose in life. He loses his virginity the first night and from then on begins his journey to manhood. Susana Requena Pineda calls Melior both an "hada amante" and also an "hada madrina" because of the Count's youth (236). Although the taboo that Melior places on Partinuplés is one that gives her the upper hand, both of the lovers benefit from their time within the enchanted space. Partinuplés takes his first steps toward becoming the man he is meant to be, and Melior chooses the man who is to be her husband and emperor.

Citing Maureen Fries, Elizabeth Augspach explains that there are three kinds of medieval women who escape narrowly-defined roles: the hero, the heroine, and the counter-hero: the first ventures forth into unknown territory; the second is confined to conquered space and awaits the knight at the end of the tale; and the last is a woman who does not adhere to the dominant culture's values. She is associated with magic and her garden is the result of devilry (114).

Melior, as the main female protagonist in the *Libro*, takes the role of the counter-hero. By cloaking her kingdom in illusion and spectacle, she could be associated with demonic powers. The magic that Melior employs is typical of the kind of black magic that is associated with sorceresses in the medieval romance tradition. Michelle Sweeney writes that there was a "tremendous anxiety surrounding the idea that a woman could use the seemingly magical power of her sexuality to control men" (27). Yet Melior dispels both the Count's fears and our own by invoking the name of the Virgin Mary upon first meeting Partinuplés. Melior's obvious Christianity allows her to both manipulate and adhere to the dominant culture's values; she is a woman who defies definition.

The initiative taken by the women in the *Libro* drives the three narrative phases of Partinuplés' pilgrimage toward fulfilling his destiny, to become Emperor of Constantinople. His secret marriage to Melior, and the taboo she imposes, demand that he keep himself separate from all that is familiar, from the tight structures of kinship. However, when the Count expresses his desire to return to France to aid in his uncle's battle against three Moorish kings, Melior arms him, which is the first step toward his *investidura*.

Melior:

El rey vuestro tío está cercado en la cibdad de París, por que vos ruego que lo vayades ayudar. Y cuydad de ser buen cauallero porque yo oya acá vuestras buenas nuevas. Y yo vos dare una spada que llevades por amor de mí, porque quantas vezes la tomaredes en la mano que se vos mienbre de mí. (337)

Melior knows that Partinuplés would not be satisfied sitting idly by while his uncle enters into fierce battle and encourages him to return to France. She does admonish him, however, to remember her and not to reveal her secret.

By being marginalized from his original community, the Count navigates his first rite of passage. Melior's castle operates, according to Bouachrine, "as a place of permissibility and prohibition, possibility and impossibility, and rupture and continuity, thus making it a safe stage for the manifestation of struggles, negotiations of power, constant shifting of identities, and love" (44). The sense of possibility stays with Partinuplés during his first return to court; he is unhappy and longs to return to the loving arms of Melior. He refuses to entertain the overtures of his mother and uncle to return to the kin group by marrying a nice girl:

Y ellos estando assí holgando, dixo la señora madre del conde al rey que bueno sería en que le diesen muger al conde, que ella sabía una donzella en Francia, fijadalgo, que era sobrina del papa. Y que aquella sería buena y que olvidaría a la fada... (354)

Upon Partinuplés' second return to France, however, the forces of the patriarchal power structure prove too great for him to resist. The Bishop of Paris, who is acting in his own best interests (he is promised an archbishopric if he is able to break up the Count's relationship), convinces Partinuplés to confess his sins. Once the Bishop understands the challenge he faces, he begs the Count to return to Cabeçadoire with a magic lantern that will allow him to see Melior for who she really is. Although the Bishop, along with the Count's mother, is convinced that he will find a demon (or, in this case, a *fada*) in his bed, the Count is certain this is not the case. Partinuplés knows that she is neither demonic nor evil, yet he is young and easily swayed. He uses the lamp, and in doing so, breaks the taboo:

Don traidor, en mal punto fezistes lo que avéis fecho, que vos fare matar y fazer pieças en quanto el día sea, que vos avedes muerto a mí y deshonorado, que no era esto lo que vos yo avía rogado, que por este recelo vos dezía yo que vos no curádes de descubrir a mí. Agora veredes vos a mí, y quantos ay en mi imperio sabrán de mi deshonra. (361-2)

Both the Church and the Court represent social and religious norms that keep Partinuplés trapped. The Bishop convinces Partinuplés of the illegitimacy of Melior's enchanted castle in order to bring him back into the fold. His actions have the opposite effect, however, as Partinuplés' banishment from Melior's safe space will send him deep into an infernal world.

Partinuplés enters the second rite of passage, liminality, after fleeing Cabeçadoire. Within the liminal phase, the pilgrim is allowed to experience seemingly capricious or anarchic forces in order to better understand how he or she ultimately fits into society. Once he or she returns to the fold, which is the pilgrim's ultimate goal, his or her opinions or priorities have been altered permanently.

Partinuplés must atone for his transgression toward Melior. This atonement, however, is not heaven-sent, but rather, as Saunders writes, caused by inner grief (71). The

Count follows in the footsteps of many knights who go mad and wander wild spaces before returning to civilization with a renewed outlook. As Saunders suggests, the forest provides a space for the re-creation of the self (72).

In order to perform his penitence, Partinuplés enters the wilds of the forest of Ardennes. Known for its association with wild beasts and untamed nature, the Ardennes allows the Count to wander unfettered in madness and desperation. During this phase, the Count loses not only his reason, but also his identity. When asked what his name is, he responds “traidor” (374).

After eight months of this performative penitence Melior’s half-sister Urracla and her servant Persies find the Count on their way back to Urracla’s castle Tenedo:

Y ellas así estando, vieron salir una alimaña muy grande y fea y denodada de una enzina. Y Urracla se fue para allá y vido que era semejança de hombre, y allególe la mano a los cabellos y tiróselos delante de la faz. (373)

Urracla recognizes that this must be Partinuplés, as she has heard that he had abandoned his home and his reason. He recognizes himself only as what he is not: no longer a Count, no longer a lover, simply a flawed and unworthy creature. Bruckner writes that his ugliness relates directly to his betrayal (132). This bestiality contrasts with his almost ethereal beauty at the end of the story, once he has redeemed himself.

The liminal nature of Urracla herself encourages Partinuplés’ liminal phase. Urracla is not only associated with the East but she also maintains an in-between status as a half-sister and illegitimate child. Urracla moves the narrative to another female-dominated space: her castle Tenedo, which, like Cabeçadoire, represents a second safe space for Partinuplés. Urracla’s goal is two-fold: she must prepare Partinuplés for battle and she must shame her sister into forgiving him. Both of these events will allow Partinuplés to reach the final stage of his development: to become the hero of his own story.

Urracla’s ability to control both Partinuplés’ destiny and her sister’s actions marks her as a kind of go-between. Urracla prepares him physically and psychologically “to display the qualities that warrant his triumph” (Mieszkowski, 184). She also bullies her sister into feeling ashamed for her actions. In this way, Urracla has set the scene for the ultimate forgiveness and triumph of love. Once Partinuplés has been saved, he is armed by Urracla and sent to be knighted along with 99 others.

The arming of Partinuplés occurs three times in the story: first, as an adolescent, by Melior; second, as a wild man, by Urracla; and third, as a fully vested knight, by Ansies. Ansies, the wife of King Hermán of Syria, encounters Partinuplés when his ship is blown off course and he is captured. Ansies, like Melior, acts as the counter-hero, according to Augspach’s definitions. She works outside the best interests of her culture and religion to save Partinuplés. Through her intervention, Partinuplés is not killed, but kept prisoner for ransom. When Hermán is called away to accompany the Sultan of Persia to Cabeçadoire for the tournament, Ansies allows him to leave to participate in the tournament on the condition that he return after the tournament ends. After Partinuplés consents to this condition, the Queen, in a reflection of Partinuplés’ first arming by Melior, gives him arms and an all-white horse and also leads him to find a magical sword in the tomb of a crusader within one of the mosques in the city of Damascus.

Partinuplés reaches the final rite of passage (aggregation, in Victor and Edith Turner's words) when he is able to join the ranks of suitors for Melior's hand. Given his prowess on the battlefield, there is no doubt that he will be one of the winners. It is only after Melior sees him, however, that she chooses him to be her mate. His beauty, which is associated with his goodness, makes him the perfect choice.

In the romance tradition women are generally relegated to ideal love or to distracting presence, either Virgin (Christian presence) or Witch/Whore (pagan presence). However, women dominate the narrative turning points of the romance.

Melior, the *primum movens* of the narrative, appears both as empress and enchantress, as Christian and pagan. It is Melior's genealogy, rather than that of the Count's, that dictates the beginning of the story. Instead of the Count's birth that is tied to the supernatural, it is Melior's birth. A Moorish enchantress foretells the birth of both Melior and her half-sister Urracla and it is this same woman who instructs Melior in the use of magic.

Y dixo la mora encantadera al emperador que fuesses a las florestas de las tierras del rey Hermán, que es frontera del imperio, y que allí avría una hija en una donzella mora y que quando viniessen, que avría en su muger la emperariz hijo o hija. (319)

It is these details that create an atmosphere of exoticism tied to the sisters' "Moorish" ancestry and a link to the East that will be present throughout the romance.

Alvaro Galmés de Fuentes, in his introduction to the Spanish translation of the romance *Aucassin et Nicolette* writes:

Dentro de un contexto sociológico del mundo árabe hemos de situar también la iniciativa de la mujer en las relaciones amorosas, frente a la pasividad del varón, circunstancia que contradice ideas erróneas preconcebidas respecto a la sociedad musulmana tradicional. (19)

The three women in Partinuplés' life, Melior, Urracla, and Ansies, are characterized by their association with the East and with magic. Each of these powerful women also inhabits a liminal space from which they are able to negotiate power structures.

Michelle Sweeney writes:

Romances focus on the achievement of a balance between private needs and public obligations. By incorporating a strong magical presence into the romance, an author creates a medium that explores both the relevant political and social issues of the day, and timeless questions of faith, love, loyalty, fate and destiny. (46)

Magic as it relates to the garden space is a prevalent element of the romance. Throughout the romance tradition, the hero is seduced by the spectacle of the garden or paradisiacal space in which he finds repose. These spaces represent nature created through magic rather than at God's hands. However, magic, as it appears in popular literature, is an accepted element of the narrative. Jacques Le Goff writes that the marvellous in the Middle Ages meant pre-Christian and supernatural. The Church, however, felt that the marvellous could

be tamed or turned to its advantage, thus the marvellous was rationalized to make way for the miracle (1988, 29).

Even though the idea of the miracle is diametrically opposed to magic (one comes from God, the other from the Devil), there was an association of magic and miracles in popular culture. Roger Chartier writes:

The interplay between the institution and the community, between a standard model and everyday experience is always dual. “Popular” religion is at the same time both acculturated and acculturating; therefore, it cannot be identified either as radically different from the religion of the clerics or as completely molded by them. (233)

The marvellous or magical shows a resistance to official ideology. We see this in the power Melior is able to wield, which counterbalances the power of the Church and in the inability of the steward of the Church to make good use of a magic potion.

Le Goff states that learned culture tended to manipulate folklore in a process of Christianization (1984, 31). The actions of the representatives of the Church in this romance are very much in keeping with Le Goff’s assertions.

Each of the three women utilizes some element of the marvellous to encourage Partinuplés to fulfil his destiny. All sorceresses, according to Elizabeth Augspach, represent the fears men have of women (116). Since Melior (sorceress, powerful woman, empress) is the prime example of what was to be feared by the patriarchy, the stewards of the Church insist that Partinuplés break the taboo for his own good. The Bishop tells the Count, “Hijo, maguera que haze demuestra de muger, no es sino pecado, que los pecados andan entre los hombres y no les veen” (259-60). Both the representatives of the Church and the Count’s family are fully vested in having Partinuplés return to the patriarchal fold. They will employ any means necessary to pull him away from the dangers of female desire, including, ironically, magic.

After his first successful turn on the battlefield, Partinuplés plans to return to Melior. His mother and uncle plot to keep him in France in order to marry the Pope’s niece. On a twist of the use of the *philocaptio*, Partinuplés is drugged in order to stay the night with the niece. Partinuplés is so intoxicated, however, that he sleeps the night away without touching the girl. When he discovers the trickery in the morning, he rages at the girl and returns to Melior.

The Church’s use of the magic potion is the first of two attempts to make the Count betray his true love. The male fear of women’s sexuality is reflected in the desire of the stewards of the Church to force Partinuplés into a loveless marriage with a “chaste” woman of their choosing. As a moral authority, the Church fails miserably. Its stewards use every means available to get its way and to encourage the hero to break his oath. According to Sweeney, magical tests help the audience judge the moral character of the hero. Without the encouragement of the Church, the Count may not have broken the taboo by himself. Once it is broken, however, it is up to the hero to find the right balance between his “personal needs and the needs of the community” (Sweeney, 46).

Bouachrine writes that the garden space allows female characters to negotiate multiple identities, while assisting the reader in the search for meaning beyond gender and racial/religious binaries (6). The garden-inspired magic that Melior uses forces the Count to “to step outside the norms of society” in order to find his destiny (Sweeney,

87). Although her magic, too, can be seen as selfish, ultimately it is for the good of Partinuplés. Urracla and Ansies also use their female-dominated spaces and the power that is tied to those spaces to inspire the Count and protect his pilgrimage. Urracla finds the count in the Ardennes and helps him return to his former state. Ansies saves Partinuplés' life and arms him with a magical sword from the tomb of a crusader.

As enchantress and as empress, Melior dominates the first part of the narrative. Once the taboo is broken, Melior is forced to become more "human". Seidenspinner-Nuñez writes that this process of humanization makes Melior's experiences more of an "effective metaphor of human experience" (73). However, to imply that Melior is less than human is to conform to the concept that her power and desire make her someone to tame rather than someone to exalt. Once this taming occurs, Melior is no longer able to control Partinuplés' destiny through magical intervention, however she and the other women in the story maintain control throughout the narrative.

Melior takes charge from the beginning of the tale and demonstrates her ability to maintain a certain amount of autonomy throughout the text. Susan Requena Pineda tells us that Melior appears as the "héroe buscador" in the first part of the book (241). Her desires drive the action whereas Partinuplés is simply the passive receptor of these desires. Melior's magical power creates an enchanted space in which there is both freedom of imagination and freedom from an imposed morality. Both Melior and Partinuplés lose their virginity and gain a sense of well-being within this safe space.

Although, as Seidenspinner-Nuñez claims, Partinuplés is much better off once his "perception of reality is no longer mediated by magical or artful deception" (66), Cabeçadoire is not the false and distracting spectacle of other treacherous resting places but rather can be redeemed as a positive, prelapsarian space that allows for a spirit of purity and security.

Even after Melior loses her magical edge, she finishes the Count's *investidura* ceremony that she had begun by arming him on his first foray into battle. This active agency on the part of Melior demonstrates that although she has been weakened, her powers are strong enough to continue acting as Empress. As Bruckner notes, Melior "appears" to reverse her role in the balance of power. Yet that power "still resides in the control of knowledge, even if that power is no longer magical" (138).

The relative autonomy of the female characters in the Spanish text is remarkable for the time in which it was written. Amy Vines, in her discussion of the 15th century English version of the Partinuplés tale, argues that Melior was most likely a model for women reading the romance. Examples of both good and evil behavior can be found in the text, and the reader must discern the lesson (247).

Along with the dominance of women, the dichotomy between East and West allows for the poem to inhabit a liminal space. The marriage of Melior and Partinuplés gives the appearance of returning to the patriarchal social structure. However, their roles of Emperor and Empress of Constantinople resonate with liminality: not only does Constantinople represent an amalgamation of both Eastern and Western cultures, but at the time of the publication of the Spanish *Libro*, it had already been conquered by the Ottoman Turks, thus making it a Muslim stronghold.

Although this text has been dismissed either as a minor romance or even a pseudo-romance of chivalry, it is prudent to remember that "all texts occupy determinate social spaces, both as products of the social world of authors and as textual agents at work in that

world” (Spiegel, 24). In this text we see a romanticizing of the East and also a rehabilitation of magic, which, according to Sweeney, pushes for a “broader discussion of social issues, like the boundaries of Christian dogmatism” (13). Contradictions abound in this text, from the powerful roles of the three Arabized women, to the relative lack of any kind of sympathetic role for the Christian Church and its stewards. And contradiction allows for a wide range of interpretations.

The end of the romance does reflect the social mores of the time, with a seemingly traditional marriage and a reinforcement of Christian ideology. However, the relationship between the empress and emperor appears to be one of equality, as reflected in the final scene in which Partinuplés’ loyal servant is baptized: Melior agrees to be his *madrina* as Partinuplés will be his *padrino*.

The safe space of Cabeçadoire is the beginning and the end of the Partinuplés’ pilgrimage. Although Cabeçadoire is no longer a place of spectacle and illusion, its liminality allows for the contradictory nature of the text to remain fast. Julian Weiss wrote that placing Alexander the Great’s final seat of power in Babylon “tames” the multiplicity of ideologies within the poem (132). It could be argued that allowing for a Christian emperor and empress of Constantinople has a similar function. Yet unlike the positive West/negative East dichotomy in the Alexander poem, the East in this narrative is depicted in a positive light whereas the stewards of the Church are shown as meddlers and troublemakers. Melior, Urracla and Ansies are associated with multiple ideologies and exotic powers, yet they create safe spaces for the hero. These female-dominated spaces allow for the hero’s growth and repose. And nowhere is that more apparent than in the end, when Partinuplés will overcome any hardship to return to the safe space created and dominated by his beloved Melior.

Female dominated spaces in literature can be places of harmony or places of deceit. In religious texts of the Middle Ages, these spaces can hold the possibility of postlapsarian redemption. In romance, these spaces can be a welcome repose or a distraction from the hero’s goal. Women in medieval literature are both caretakers and spectacle-makers. Whether this space is a Marian garden or a magical castle, however, these spaces represent the beginning and end of a pilgrimage: a home for the searching man.

The Partinuplés tale is not merely a reflection of the time in which it was written, but rather, “designed at will to invent new fusions of history and romance, reality and fiction, as we enjoy the pleasures of both and the limits of neither” (Bruckner, 151). This is a liminal text for a liminal time. Although the time period in Spain is verging on the Early Modern, the ambiguity of the text puts it into a space that unites rather than divides. Its plurality of cultures and its nod to equality of the sexes allows the reader to imagine a world that allows for possibility, rather than probability.

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